

✓ 2075







ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER  
BENSON



# ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON

AS SEEN BY SOME FRIENDS

*Pax tibi : salutant te amici*

LONDON  
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1925

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

AT Eton, almost exactly half a century ago, Ryle *ma*: K.S. chose, or was allotted Arthur Benson K.S. as one of his fags. Hugh Macnaghten K.S., now Vice-Provost of Eton and one of the contributors to this book, was another. From that connection a friendship between fagmaster and fag was created which was only terminated by Arthur Benson's death on June 17, 1925. A bare two months later, Bishop Ryle, Dean of Westminster, father of the editor of this book, followed his old fag into the Unknown.

In October 1885, the year in which Arthur Benson returned as a master to Eton, my father wrote to him informing him of the entry of the present writer into the world, and suggested that he should take up the position of godfather to the infant and provide the customary christening "mug". The fag dutifully obeyed his old fagmaster, and, at the appropriate seasons, religiously did his duty by his godson, tactfully substituting, in later years,

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half a golden sovereign for the earlier donations of such classics as Aesop's *Fables* or Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (strongly bound).

In October 1899 the godfather became the House master as well, and it is from that month that I can date the beginning of my close personal friendship with Arthur Benson.

Shortly after the latter's sudden death, and as the outcome of a discussion about him with my father, who was himself, with patience and fortitude, awaiting his end, it occurred to me that a little volume of essays—a symposium—from the pens of a few friends, reminiscent and tributary in character—appreciative (as anything written of him by the friends of A. C. B. *must* be) but not unduly laudatory—might be welcomed, not only by those who knew Arthur Benson personally, but also by some of that much wider circle of men and women who felt that they knew one side of him through his writings.

It seemed to me that in the case of Arthur Benson such a tribute would not be superfluous or impertinent.

From that idea this volume has materialised. There has been no collusion between the writers: each contributor is responsible for his own personal opinion, and for that alone. A certain amount of

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

overlapping is inevitable in a collection of papers of this kind. There has been no attempt to make the book in any degree biographical or exhaustive. Some of the contributors are proficient literary men, others mere amateurs. But I think it is obvious that certain qualities and characteristics possessed by Arthur Benson were realised and appreciated by all of them, and each of them has tried to express that realisation and appreciation in his own way.

Some of the readers of this little book may be unacquainted with Benson's career at Eton and at Cambridge, as Schoolmaster and Don. Perhaps they will welcome the additional light thrown upon a man whom they have only known, hitherto, in his published works.

Here and there the reader may find a hint of friendly criticism. Not a few of the general public have failed to find the comfort and inspiration in Arthur Benson's books which others *have* found and valued. Even his best friends had an uneasy feeling that *something* was lacking, though they found it hard to define exactly what the deficiency was. One of those friends, and one whose honest and candid opinions Arthur Benson always appreciated, has, in this book, frankly stated what, in his own view, was lacking, and laid his finger on what he considers the underlying cause. It is

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not improbable that the opinions expressed in that paper are held by others as well as by the writer of it. I have no hesitation in including it in this volume, since, as I have said before, *all* the contributors to this symposium were Arthur Benson's "friends".

If my old fagmaster, George Lyttelton, reads this book, he will note that I have availed myself of several of his suggestions.

To Owen Hugh Smith, who supplied information about Benson's connection with the Fishmongers' Company and sent me a copy of A. C. B.'s unpublished essay—"Pensioners"—which appears here as an Appendix, and to E. F. Benson, who, as his brother's literary executor, kindly gave me permission to print it, I desire to express my gratitude.

E. H. RYLE.

*September 1925.*

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## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY AND DATES OF PUBLICATION OF CHIEF LITERARY WORKS

April 24, 1862. Born at The Lodge, Wellington College.

1872. Entered Temple Grove School, East Sheen.

1874. Entered Eton as a K.S.

1881. Scholarship at King's College, Cambridge.

1884. First Class Classical Tripos.

1885. Master at Eton.

1886. *Memoirs of Arthur Hamilton.*

1887. *Archbishop Laud—a Study.*

1890. *Men of Might* (with H. F. W. Tatham).

1892. House Master.

1893. *Poems.*

1895. *Lyrics.*

1896. *Essays.*

„ *Lord Vyet and other Poems.*

1899. Moves to Godolphin House. (A. C. B.'s wins House  
Cricket Cup.)

1899. *Fasti Etonenses.*

„ *Life of Archbishop Benson.*

1900. *The Professor and other Poems.*

1902. *The Schoolmaster.*

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1903. Resigns Mastership at Eton.

1903. *The Hill of Trouble.*

„ *The House of Quiet.*

„ *Tennyson.*

„ *Selections from Whittier.*

1903-4. The Old Granary, Cambridge.

1904. Fellow of Magdalene.

1904. *The Isles of Sunset.*

„ *Rossetti* (English Men of Letters).

1905. *Peace and other Poems.*

„ *Edward FitzGerald* (English Men of Letters).

„ *The Upton Letters.*

1906. Hinton Hall, Haddenham.

1906. *Thread of Gold.*

„ *Walter Pater* (English Men of Letters).

„ *The Gate of Death.*

„ *From a College Window.*

1907. Created C.V.O.

1907. *Beside Still Waters.*

„ *The Altar Fire.*

„ *Correspondence of Queen Victoria* (1837-1861).

(1907-8. Nervous breakdown.)

1908. *At Large.*

1909. *Collected Poems.*

1910. *The Silent Isle.*

1911. *Ruskin.*

„ *The Leaves of the Tree.*

1912. *The Child of the Dawn.*

„ *Thy Rod and Thy Staff.*

1913. *Along the Road.*

„ *Joyous Gard.*

## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

1914. *Where no Fear was.*

„ *Watersprings.*

1915. Master of Magdalene, LL.D. Cantab.

1915. *Hugh.*

„ *Escape and other Essays.*

1916. *Father Payne.*

(1917-22. Nervous breakdown.)

1917. *Life and Letters of Maggie Benson.*

1923. *The Reed of Pan.*

„ *The Trefoil.*

1924. *Memories and Friends.*

June 17, 1925. Died at Cambridge.

1925. *The House of Menerdue.*



I

TRIVIAL REMINISCENCES,  
EARLY AND LATE

By Dr. M. R. JAMES (Provost of Eton)

I

B



## I

### TRIVIAL REMINISCENCES, EARLY AND LATE

It is not easy to write with balance and proportion of an old and beloved friend who has, for over fifty years, been a part of one's life: and the fact that that friend is one who has written most copiously about his own experiences, surroundings, views, and emotions does not make the business easier, for one runs the risk of merely boiling down into duller language what he has said himself about himself, in the best words that a very remarkable intellect and a highly trained literary sense could furnish. My best chance of infusing any kind of freshness into my sketch of Arthur Benson will probably be not to have recourse at all to his writings, but simply to my recollections of him—superficial as these may be—during the first and last thirds of his life.

It was in 1873 that I first met Arthur Benson—Benson *mi*: in the school list of Temple Grove, East Sheen. He has written of the school and of its great headmaster, O. C. Waterfield, in *Memories and Friends*, and I will not here try to add much to the

picture he has drawn of the environment. He had been there a longish time when I arrived, and I did not know him particularly well. However, we were at least acquainted, and he did confide to me a poem composed by his elder brother, Martin, which I will here set down. It referred to William Rawlings, Master of the First Class and a remarkable teacher, to whom I suspect I owe a great deal of the grounding of any scholarship I may have acquired. The poet requires us to suppose that Mr. Rawlings has contracted a cold which he has found it difficult to shake off, and thus he sings:

Old Billy's cold is getting worse,  
And all the money in his purse  
On lozenges he's spent.  
But Waterfield, who's wiser still,  
Wishing to try a Doctor's skill,  
For Doctor (? Foster)'s sent.  
He said, " Old Billy's made of wood.  
A bath, I think, would do him good:  
But O be careful, please,  
The water does not touch his eyes:  
The water in the bath should rise  
No higher than his knees."

The same very gifted brother Martin (who died a scholar of Winchester), with a small group of the First Class, had made themselves into an informal club which, with a pleasing sense of what was due to them, they had christened the Aristocracy: and the only *dictum* of Arthur's which I remember related to this society. It was not of outstanding importance.

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I had made some remark about a dish which was customarily served to us on Sundays, and to which, for no good reason, the name of Resurrection Pie was commonly given. Arthur, with kindly severity, said: "Ah! the Aristocracy call that Plate Pie." And why in the name of goodness, I wonder, do I remember that?

Anyhow, it is all I do remember—except his general appearance—of Benson *mi.*, who, in 1874, got his scholarship and entered College at Eton in the September of that year; where, in 1876, I found myself once again a member of the same community with him, and, as before, not much thrown into his company for the first years. For in College "the elections"—the batch of boys elected to scholarships in any one year is so called—keep pretty much to themselves at first, and a senior election will not tolerate any liberties from a junior one. ("Nerve to my election", an amazing phrase, would mean impertinence of this kind, calling for forcible repression.) Arthur Benson was well up towards the middle of College when I entered it, and though we played in the same game at the Wall, there was little communication before we met in the Headmaster's division—he in Sixth Form, I in Liberty (the first six collegers outside Sixth Form), in his last year and my last but one. Then there were great times. In the Winter or Easter halves, when lock-up was early, and there were no outside engagements, and the Newcastle was not very imminent,

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whole evenings would be spent in Benson's room or Tatham's—these two being already close friends; from six to nine o'clock four or five people would just sit and talk—not canvassing the problems of Life and Being, no, nor yet the probabilities of some one getting or not getting their colours, but of what we liked in books or did not like in our neighbours; of buildings, churches, novels, incidents in Chapel, vagaries of masters—nothing, I am afraid, that is either exalted or picturesque in the description. Here was formed much of the mythology—about the rulers of Eton—of which Benson and Tatham were most skilful inventors and elaborators, ably seconded by Boyle, Childers and E. M. Wood. Such mythology is the delight of all boys, and springs perennial from every generation of them. The humour of it comes out fresh as ever when the right people meet, but, put down on paper, fades and dies. Why am I amused when I recall the fiction—doubtless one of Arthur Benson's—that there was but one verse of the Psalms for the month which Ainger ever sang in Chapel, on the 16th morning? “He should have fed them also with the finest wheat flour, and with honey out of the stony rock should I have satisfied thee.”

Arthur Benson had a great deal of knowledge about buildings even as a boy, and a great taste for them: also a very considerable faculty for drawing them, in the manner of J. L. Petit, whose masterly sketches of French churches, reproduced by the

## TRIVIAL REMINISCENCES

“Anastatic” process, were in the School Library at Eton. I treasure a sketch in this manner, quite unreasonably entitled “A View in Bourges”, which Arthur drew in a notebook of mine one day when I had been enlarging on the beauties of Bourges, to which my tutor, H. E. Luxmoore, had taken me in the summer holidays of 1880, thereby introducing me to a new world of interests. It is a sort of general assembly of churches, all standing different ways. It was also Arthur who disabused me of the belief that only Gothic architecture was to be admired, and taught me to love St. Paul’s and the City churches, and in particular the organ cases of the Wren period, which were always appearing on his scribbling paper, in proportions ever more colossal. The records of the removal, under the stress of the Gothic revival, of classical screens surmounted with organs in such places as Durham and Wimborne, and our own Eton, aroused his fierce anger. And as years went on his dislike extended to the removal of anything at all that was two or three generations old. When (in December last) he saw Eton Chapel divested of its stall-canopies (of 1847) in order to expose the wall paintings (of 1487) he was dreadfully vexed: it was like a palaeolithic cavern, he said. And the worst outrages of the ’forties and ’fifties in painted glass had become more or less reverend in his eyes; at any rate they must not be interfered with.

But indeed his knowledge of buildings was very

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remarkable. He designed an excellent dwelling-house in the Grange Road at Cambridge; and in the Old Lodge at Magdalene, the big hall and many of the other additions he made were of his fashioning, and very successful and characteristic they are. He was also a preserver of ancient things. The English church of Rotterdam, a fine Wrennish building of 1703, was—I must think, wantonly—pulled down just before the War. Arthur, persuaded by the late Mr. Arthur Leveson Gower, bought most of the internal woodwork and gave a quantity of it to Selwyn College, where it makes a most dignified appearance in the Hall. The arrangement of this, too, was largely thought out by him. And he was indefatigable in holiday times in exploring every sort of old building, sacred or secular, that could be reached by bicycle or car, and no better company could be asked for than his at such times, and no better conveyer of the impression the place made on him. “I *must* tell you about Godolphin House—or Beauprè—(or whatever it might be). My goodness, *what* a place!” was the common opening, and then followed a quite admirable description.

But I have travelled far from winter evenings in Sixth Form Passage. In spring and summer there were occasionally interesting times when he would conduct an exploration of those parts of the college buildings which were not strictly within our sphere. We found a way of getting on to the roofs of Cloisters

## TRIVIAL REMINISCENCES

which was diverting: and there was one Half when workmen were engaged in Chapel, and we found where they put the key of the turrets at the east end, and spent happy hours on the roof of that. Fairly often in summer, after six, a quartet would assemble round the High Table in Hall—reminding me, now, of the English Singers in an exceedingly modest way—and warble (to no audience) the few glees and catches we knew by heart, and also considerable stretches of Psalms, sung to the double chants which Arthur and Boyle and Childers so much relished. Here was another province—that of Church Music—in which Arthur was very much at home, and infected us with his likings. From Boyle, who was a keen and learned musician, he learned a great deal himself; but Lincoln, and the surroundings of his boyhood generally, had made him familiar with more.

Looking back, I am amused and pleased to think how much odd stuff we knew in the way of eighteenth-century hymn tunes and florid double chants. We very often looked in at the week-day afternoon services in Chapel when Psalms or Anthem were to our taste; and we quite haunted St. George's, especially on short after-fours in the Easter Half. How truculent, too, we were when Barnby gave us Gounod or even Mendelssohn! Boyce and Greene for us, please! Gounod's "Here by Babylon's Wave" was our idea of what an Anthem ought not to be; nor am I confident we erred.

I should like, in this connection, to write more

of William Boyle, a beloved figure. That I may perhaps do elsewhere. At present let me return to Arthur and his music. He never could manage to read it with any ease, but he had a great facility in picking up harmonies and also in improvising—very skilfully, to my ear—on the piano, or the organ if he could get at one. There is a good deal in his writings that shows how his musical taste widened after Eton days, and how understanding his pleasure in music was. Probably he never cared for what his and my generation thinks of as intentional ugliness; but apart from that, he was fairly catholic in power of appreciation, and I believe expert musicians such as Arthur Goodhart would agree that he was really very knowledgeable. His printed compositions may perhaps not include more than a *Kyrie*, but chants flowed from his pen. He kept his interest in Church music always; he gave Magdalene its first organ; and I was struck by finding the other day in his study a bound volume of the weekly “Chapel bills” of King’s for 1924 and 1925.

So, then, in October of 1881 Arthur went up to King’s as a scholar, and I did the same a year later, apprehensive that I should find him and the rest of the Eton friends rapt into a sphere far above my own. But there was nothing to be feared; one fell in at once with the old circle, reinforced by some new elements. I think we were all inclined to look askance on that part of the non-Etonian King’s which showed (as we thought) an inclination to cast aside

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tradition. One cannot deny that there was an Eton clique. I think it was inevitable, in that stage of the development of the college, that some cleavage should exist: but perhaps there is no need to dwell on the phase. Whatever "set" there was, Arthur was the most prominent figure in it.

Arthur's rooms were, when I came up, on the ground floor of the staircase next to Chapel on the left-hand side; then he moved to the top of the same staircase on the same side. I succeeded him in both sets. In the top one he had decorated cupboard doors with designs in blue, somewhat in the manner of Blake, and, according to his wont, had had mysterious mottoes painted above doors. *Luce magistra* stood over that which led to the bedroom (it was thought to refer to the bedroom candle); *Fay bien crains rien*, the family motto, with the family arms, was over the mantelpiece. An enormous bird dress, worn by Boyle at the performances of Aristophanes' *Birds*, collected dust above the fireplace in the bedroom, where it was stretched upon the wall, and continued to do so throughout my occupancy. These rooms were once William Johnson's (Cory); the lower set had been J. K. Stephen's.

Do not expect a chronicle of high aspiration and noble achievement on the lines of *Julian Home: a Tale of University Life*. We were not wholly prosaic, but we mistrusted those who seemed to be qualifying for the office of prophet. Perhaps—perhaps it was because that tendency was so loudly preached by

Oscar Browning; there are apostles who damage the causes they honestly champion.

Many sidelights on his life at King's are to be found in Arthur Benson's books—sketches of Bradshaw, of Oscar Browning, of other worthies of the time. Let me recall less imposing matters. Arthur's out-of-door activities as an undergraduate have left little impression on me. He may occasionally have played football—his kicking was wonderful; may in very early days have gone once or twice to be tubbed on the river (I do remember accompanying him in an eight which appeared in caps and gowns at the May or Lent races one year), but I feel sure he never looked at a bat, and I am only clear that he rode a high bicycle. Clubs and Societies? There was the Pitt, to which he belonged; the Union, where I cannot think he ever spoke; the Chitchat, which met on Saturday evenings to read papers. This last small body was a very sociable affair, in which Arthur played a large part; but when I ask myself what his papers were about, I get no response from Echo or any other source. The construction of a Tripos of the twelve best novels in the language was the employment of one evening, resulting from one of his papers, I imagine. *Esmond* headed the list. The curious inquirer may find the whole business in the University Library at Cambridge, to which, when the Society had been long defunct, I presented its books. Another Society there was, whose fate it amuses me to recall,—the

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Cambridge Browning Society, to which Arthur contributed a brilliant paper on *Waring*, so brilliant that he was unanimously elected Secretary on the first opportunity. It never met again. Papers were offered by enthusiastic members. Pattison Muir, a distinguished chemist at Caius, had one which he was particularly anxious to read, but nothing could induce the Secretary to summon a meeting. When one thinks how excellent a man of business, and how punctual and methodical Arthur was in later life, it is difficult to resist the conviction that there was an impish intention at the back of his treatment of the Browning Society—indeed, we commonly said at the time that he took it in hand with the deliberate determination of killing it. Still, in those days it would not have occurred to any of us to describe Arthur as a man of method.

We pass to the Drama. I think Arthur made an appearance in the first of the Cambridge Greek plays, the *Ajax*, in the winter of 1882, wherein J. K. Stephen was the famous protagonist. In November of 1883 came on the *Birds*, where Arthur was a most impressive High Priest, and I believe that is the sum of his record as an actor. He did not join the A.D.C.

Literature after all must rank as the principal pursuit. There is a good deal of his writing, prose and verse, in the old files of the *Cambridge Review*. A particularly pleasant imitation of the Oriental manner comes to my memory; it contained

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advice to a Freshman entering the University of Bagdad, and has not been reproduced. There was also a Symposium on the Education of a Gentleman. The *Memoirs of Arthur Hamilton* (1886) was, I imagine, the first of the stately row of volumes that make up his works. Any one who wants a key to his "outlook" at this time must read this, of course. It is, in some sort, a draft of a great deal that came later; or should one say, a prologue thereto? The setting—an imaginary memoir—was a favourite vehicle with him. The very readable study of *Archbishop Laud*, which he wrote as a thesis or dissertation for a Fellowship, was another early work. It failed of its object, for it added little, if anything, to the published sources, and Arthur was never attracted by research. The kind of erudition which is pleasing to me had never any charm for him; but, as his edition of *Queen Victoria's Letters* and his *Life* of his father show, he quite realised the requirements of such work.

In 1885 Arthur went to Eton as a Master, and at that point I leave a gap of twenty years in this record. Not that I lost sight of him, but there was no longer the possibility of anything like daily meetings; besides, others can write of him as Master and Tutor with a knowledge I do not possess.

In 1904 he came back to Cambridge, and the first house he took was a curious abode called the Old Granary, just across Silver Street bridge by the mill. Approached by a flight of stairs to which a

## TRIVIAL REMINISCENCES

door in the wall gave access, it had no ground floor, and no garden of any kind, but there was a balcony giving on the mill-pool. Arthur had a fable of having heard two undergraduates passing by and one reading the board at the door inscribed "The Old Granary". "The Old Canary?" said he; "I believe a minor poet lives there; it's rather a good name."

In the spring of 1905 the question arose as to the Head Mastership of Eton. I shall not concern myself further with it than to say that whatever Arthur's real wishes may have been on the subject (and I am not sure that his mind was very clear about it), he was almost certainly the happier for the appointment not coming his way. It is most probable, one can see in the light of after events, that his health would have suffered, as it did when there was no very apparent cause; and a breakdown at Eton, entailing resignation, would have left him without that quiet refuge of the Magdalene Fellowship which was so thoroughly congenial. Never was there a happier inspiration than that which came to Stuart Donaldson, of securing Arthur as a Fellow of the College of which he himself had just been made Master. Here Arthur found a particularly pleasant society, and leisure combined with opportunities for beautifying and benefiting his surroundings, as well as for seeing as much, or as little, as he chose of the company of undergraduates and seniors. Cambridge was not slow in realising what an acquisition it had got. Arthur was, alike,

the best of hosts and of guests. He very soon became a member of *The Family*, that ancient, and it is said, Jacobite dining club which meets fortnightly on Fridays. I am not sure that he was a member of its younger sister the *Society*, but he was often a guest there, and all College Halls welcomed him. But it is natural for me to prize most in recollection the frequent small gatherings of three or four familiars to spend an evening over that little-known but noble game—the *only* card game for three people—*Jacobi*, and to be refreshed perhaps by the reading of an episode from the many-volumed *Diary* in which a vast deal of high comedy is locked up. These occasions were quite certain to be delightful. I never knew one that was not.

In 1907 Professor Newton died, and Arthur took in hand the Old Lodge in which he had lived, and transformed it into that most attractive dwelling which it now is. Before this he had had rooms in the Pepys building at Magdalene. It is with the Old Lodge that most of the cheerful memories are bound up in my mind, even though the Cambridge years were chequered by the two long breakdowns in Arthur's health, and by the War and all its wounds.

In the years between his two illnesses Arthur was taking his share in University business, and was a valued member of any Syndicate he would join. On those of the Press and the Library, of both of which I was Chairman, I could see this for myself. The Press Syndicate, by the way, used to stimulate his pictorial

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instincts very much, and his scribbling papers, covered with landscapes, organ cases, or—*proh nefas!*—rather libellous likenesses of his colleagues, were carefully collected and, I hope, preserved by the then Secretary, A. R. Waller. Would that I knew where an earlier collection of pictures and Limericks about the authorities of King's is now to be found!

For I have an uneasy feeling that future generations, who derive their ideas of Arthur Benson from such books as *The Golden Thread*, *Beside Still Waters*, and so on, may conceive of him as a pale and ghost-like figure, bowed with *Weltschmerz*, and seldom speaking but in a level musical tone. That would be a great pity. Nobody enjoyed the pleasant things of life more than he: nobody laughed more, or more infectiously, when he was in the mood: nobody had a greater zest or gust (as Dr. Johnson might say) for simple jokes. Here, now, is an example of an anecdote that gave him pleasure. It was no doubt elaborated by him from a newspaper paragraph. A non-stop train was passing rapidly through an underground station in London. As it flew by, a door of a carriage opened and there appeared a small and meagre old man with a long grey goatee beard, carrying a large green carpet-bag. Regardless of the fact that the train was not stopping at that station, he stepped out on to the platform and instantly began to run—carried on by the impetus of the train—much faster than he could naturally run—along the whole length of the platform, until, carpet-bag and

all, he brought up against the bookstall and broke both his legs.

I don't say that is a very good story as I tell it, but as Arthur Benson told it, it was exceedingly funny; and my point is that when you read the delicate introspective books, you have to reckon also with the fact that the writer of them was a person capable of boisterous mirth and amused by jokes of a simplicity as elemental as the butter slide at the pantomime. Introspective of course he was—too much so, we said, for his own happiness—and he delighted in putting his introspections upon paper, and found to his great pleasure that a vast public liked him to do so. He would never read Max Beerbohm's admirable parody of his writings in *A Christmas Garland*, for he said it would put him out of conceit with the particular *genre* which was dear to him; and I think he was right, for there were very many good souls dispersed all over the English-speaking world who derived immense comfort from finding that there was somebody who could put into words what they dimly felt. And this power which he had of becoming the consoler of a number of people who did not very well know what was troubling them, was of real service to his generation. At the same time, the method by which the healing was conveyed was, as we know, very susceptible of ridicule; and those who had once found something to laugh at in the books often ceased to be able to find anything else.

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A bibliography of Arthur's works—which some one ought to undertake—would show an immense activity between his first illness and the beginning of the War. He was certainly at that time insatiable in running hither and thither to lecture, in doing college work, reading and criticising the essays of undergraduates, entertaining; and, with all this, the hours of every morning seemed to be devoted to answering the letters of unknown persons who brought their spiritual difficulties to him, and the latter part of every afternoon to the book that was in hand. It was a very full and very happy life that he led at this time. There was a similar outburst of energy after his recovery from his second illness. Every engagement, social or other, that offered itself he accepted, and he was looking forward with actual pleasure to becoming not only Prime Warden of the Fishmongers' Company, but Vice-Chancellor of the University. Would such an accumulation of affairs have proved too heavy? Would the veil of depression have fallen on him again, not to be lifted? It is of no use to speculate, but some of us had our misgivings: it hardly seemed possible that the vivid enjoyment of life in which, to the delight and thankfulness of us all, he moved in his last two years could be maintained.

However, it is not my object to dwell on sadnesses. I want to present Arthur Benson as a cheerful figure, which he undoubtedly was. It is always a regret to me that he did not sit down one day and write a

book of frankly comic content: a symposium of his Cambridge friends and acquaintances would have been a treasure, especially if, without incurring an action for libel, he could have included his pictorial versions of their—of our—appearance. His *Diary* and his letters may in part supply the gap. In the former he used sometimes to record in great detail scenes and discussions which appealed to his sense of humour; nor was his pen wholly innocent of gall. In his letters, which invariably came by return of post to his correspondent, there was nearly always some pleasing turn of language, irrelevant to the main subject: very generally in my case in the form of a Dickensian allusion (for, with gratitude be it said, he was an accomplished Dickens scholar), or a small joke would be pursued with skill and thoroughness. Thus, *à propos* of Bentley's treatment of the text of Milton, I had suggested that a line in *Lycidas* needed emendation:

And now my oat proceeds  
And listens to the heralds of the sea.

"Oats", I said with some reason, "do not proceed; surely we should read *cat* here?" "No," Arthur replied, "plausible and even picturesque as is your suggestion, it does not completely heal the corruption. Percy Lubbock would prefer *goat* as nearer to the *ductus litterarum*. I would go a step farther and read *cab*." In my answer I hinted a doubt as to whether cabs were known in the age of Milton: it

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was at least a point that deserved investigation. This was countered with success: "Do not we read in Scripture of a cab in the town of Samaria, and a cab, moreover, so old that it had become filled with doves' dung?" Such was the course of a literary controversy which was allowed to end at this point.

In all this there has been no account of Arthur's religious or political views (has he not, indeed, set them forth himself as clearly as was possible?), or of his sorrows and troubles, and very little has been said about his friends. I could write a great deal on every one of these topics, but the regretful tone I feel to be alien to the picture of my old friend which I wished to present; and whatever disparaging epithet I might earn by this record, I set out upon it with a resolve that I would not be solemn.



II  
THE ETON MASTER

By HUGH MACNAGHTEN (Vice-Provost of Eton)



## II

### THE ETON MASTER

ARISTOTLE's words, " the man must not be honoured above the truth ", should be taken to heart by every biographer. It is not merely that adverse criticism is required, if the truth be so; very often it is the subject of the biography who suffers if the writer refrains from justifiable criticism. For men and women are endeared to others by their frailties and weaknesses hardly less than by their virtues. A faultless hero or heroine is intolerable in a play, not only because there is something " shocking " (*μιαρόν*) in the ruin of an innocent person, but because there is something colourless, something insipid in faultlessness. " Is there any taste ", Job asks indignantly, " in the white of an egg? " (I have to trust my memory throughout, as I am writing at a long distance from the nearest book.) We do not like a great man less because of his little vanities: even if Caesar's childish delight in the special privilege which the senate accorded him, the right at all times to wear a laurel wreath, was

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due to a morbid desire to conceal his baldness, we would not wish it to have been otherwise: and if Arthur Benson was too sensitive, too introspective, and perhaps a little too fond of comfort, we should do him wrong if we ignored it. But let the critic do what he will, he will discover in the Eton master very little which he will not be compelled to love. It is of the Eton master that I have been asked to write. When the request was first made, I hesitated, for the convincing reason that I was not Arthur's intimate friend at Eton. Indeed it was only in the last three years of his life, when we rarely met but wrote often, that I came to know him really well. But when the request was repeated, and I was urged to write "not necessarily from the point of view of an intimate", I could not refuse my fagmaster's son, and I add this to the short appreciation that I have already written.

Towards the end of March 1886 Dr. Warre asked me to fill a vacancy at Eton for the summer half, and I went there at once to see about lodgings. I happened to meet Arthur Benson in the street (he was then living with Edward Lyttelton in the beautiful gabled house which faces Barne's pool) and he welcomed me with affection, though we had seen little of each other at Cambridge, and invited me to tea. I went, and found him alone, as Edward happened to be out. It is strange how one remembers such little things after forty years, but indeed I had reason to be grateful. His pupil room

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was already full: parents were besieging him to take their children, ten years on, into his House: among the masters he had many friends and no enemy. He was marked out for an inevitably brilliant future: I could not help knowing this, and I was all the more impressed by his simplicity and goodwill. When Edward Lyttelton married, Arthur necessarily left Baldwin's Shore and went to live over Ingaltou Drake's, now Spottiswoode's: he had, however, wished to join Hubert Brinton and myself in Weston's Yard: it is one of the most attractive houses at Eton with a tiny sheltered garden: Edward Impey, who was senior to Benson, also wished to come and join us, and he came. We welcomed him for many reasons: further, we were already a little afraid that Arthur Benson did not share our views on the classical curriculum! But I like to remember that he wished to come. Shortly afterwards he became a House-master and occupied first the little white house which was pulled down to make room for School Hall, and then the house, or, to be more accurate, the group of cottages, now held by Mr. Chaffey. The passage to-day is rather lovely, with its tubs of flowers, recalling a Dutch courtyard: in those days it was cobbled, bare, and noisy: windows in the neighbourhood were often broken. For Hale's was one of the great historic Houses, and had many merits, but it was not "the veriest home" of peace or of scholarship. Hale's boys loved their Dame and feared nobody. Some

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of them were Arthur Benson's pupils. Now Arthur was *comparatively* indifferent to successes won on the river or in School Field, and he hated disorder and any approach to rowdiness. Here then was an unpromising situation. Arthur, as was his way, showed consummate tact in dealing with it. He maintained friendly relations with his powerful neighbours, and yet somehow inspired his own boys with the love of *gentleness*. But to start a House is no easy task, and he began to be troubled with sleeplessness. When he awoke in the early hours he would get up and write, prose or poetry. Possibly this is wiser than to lie tossing in bed: but the strain was great and undoubtedly he suffered from it afterwards. Not that any boy had any cause to guess that he slept poorly: on the contrary he was always reasonable, sympathetic, equable: *in loco parentis* was of him no idle phrase, but are many parents as wise? It is impossible to imagine relations between boys and masters more ideal than those which obtained in his House: some masters are too boyish, others too stiff, others too variable: Arthur was exactly right. No boy ever took a liberty with him and no boy was indifferent to his displeasure. Affection was tempered by reverence. Let me give one proof of this. A pupil of Arthur's who was not in his House, behaved badly in Chapel. The master who was sitting just behind him sent for him and remonstrated. The boy, who was large and influential, put his hands in his pockets, stood



COOPER.

FINDLAY.

WAGG.

HERSCHELL.

LEITH.

LE NEVE FOSTER.

STURGIS.

THORNHILL.

A. C. B.

GOSCHEN III.

LUBBOCK.

EDEN.

W. CADOGAN.

GOSCHEN III.

CHURCHILL.

ALDERSON.

HERZ.

DRURY-LOWE.

*Hills & Saunders.*

"BENSON'S" (1893).



## THE ETON MASTER

in front of the fireplace, and began a rather impertinent harangue. The master (H. F. W. Tatham) listened for a while and then said, "Very well; as you don't care to listen to me, I shall send you on to your tutor". Instantly the boy climbed down, or, to be exact, took his hands out of his pockets, left the fireplace, and apologised profusely. The mere thought of his tutor had sufficed. Again, I do not think I ever heard a boy say that he could not get on with Mr. Benson, and yet some boys quarrel with any master, or (from the other point of view) some masters quarrel with any boy. I do, however, remember that a sixth-form boy in Arthur Benson's House said to another master, "I think I should have cared for the classics if I had been in your House", implying perhaps to some extent that his tutor did not care for them. Personally I am convinced that this was not the case. Arthur loved the classics, but contended that an almost exclusively classical education, though possibly best for a few boys, was not ideally good for the majority, and was in some cases worse than useless. Further, he felt that he was fighting almost single-handed on the side of common sense, and this made him at the time a little less than fair to the claims of Greek. But he never denied the supremacy of Greek literature. Best of all, he taught boys to love English. A question which could be answered by an essay or a little poem was what he and his division most enjoyed. Such answers he looked over with

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scrupulous care, and his appreciative comments stimulated boys who, sadly conscious of their own wooden Latin verses and vile Latin prose, had never dreamed that they were capable of any literary excellence. *The Schoolmaster* was written by one who understood his business.

When once the secret is out, naturally many masters avail themselves of the knowledge, and I know that Arthur Benson's methods would not be exceptional now. But I am writing of the end of the nineteenth century when he was a pioneer. Indeed, I think that he was the first at Eton to blaze this particular trail. Further, Arthur loved to gather from all sources anything of interest, partly for his own pleasure, partly for the sake of others. It was just like him to have a little brass made recording the height of the water in his dining-room in the great flood of November 1894, and to wish to leave it there as a permanent record. His mind was stored with interesting anecdotes, which he gathered from every source as naturally and easily as a bee gathers sweets from flowers. I once heard him say of a very able man of affairs: "He knows everything and makes everything uninteresting". But of Arthur himself "*nihil tetigit quod non ornavit*" was the simple truth. Probably Dr. Hornby made better after-dinner speeches: but at dinner I wonder if any one has ever talked so delightfully as Arthur. His last years at Eton were spent at the House to which he (it was so like him to have thought of it)

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was the first to give Godolphin's name. His House was never exactly what boys call the best House at Eton, only a combative and competitive House can achieve that distinction. Arthur Benson was by nature utterly opposed to competition. Probably he was glad if his boys did well in games: but he was not a constant watcher of games or matches, and I doubt if his House ever won the House-cup. Indeed, his boys themselves took a *comparatively* dispassionate view of such successes. Probably they will not assent to this statement: let me therefore be more precise: I only mean that whereas some Houses think that winning makes *all* the difference, Benson's never seemed to think so. "The game's the thing", was a sentiment to which the tutor gave expression, and with which his House agreed. Indeed, no House to my knowledge reflected the tutor more faithfully: it is easier to say this than to prove it, but I can at least bring some evidence in support of my assertion. Towards the end of last century a House-master who is only a moderate cricketer was watching upper club nets in Agar's plough rather wistfully: before long the captain of the XI., seeing that he was in "full change", came and asked him if he would be good enough to bowl, found him a net, made him feel that he was wanted, and thanked him very gratefully. That captain was at Arthur Benson's House. Again, on the day that the news came of the relief of Mafeking there was much rowdyism in London, and much more than enough some twenty miles

away from London. Arthur himself told me that he would sooner leave Eton than endure such another day: but his own House (I happen to know) behaved quite blamelessly. Once more, his boys were as hospitable as he was himself and constantly asked masters to tea. Whether this habit is absolutely desirable, I am not prepared to say: it is common enough now, but in his days it marked a distinct advance. Manners are not unimportant, when they reflect the inner feelings. Arthur told me himself that one captain of the XI. in his House, who was inevitably, through no fault of his own, always a little late for boys' dinner, never failed to say, "Sorry, sir", as he took his place. An empty formula? It might of course be that: in this case it was an audible proof of good feeling, and Arthur valued it as such. Once there was trouble at boys' dinner: a boy in another House had just been chosen, rather unexpectedly, to play at Lord's, but had also just been complained of, and Arthur's captain said rather cynically, but not unnaturally, "I don't expect he minds *that*, as he has got his eleven". Arthur was rightly vexed, and wisely showed it. "I am really sorry", he said to his captain, "to hear you say that", and there was no further conversation for the next minute or two, till grace was said. The captain stayed behind and apologised, saying that he did not mean that being complained of was a matter of indifference, but only that a boy who had just been given his colours would not mind it quite

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so much. Which of course was very true. In fact, all Arthur's quarrels ended well. Or rather Arthur never quarrelled with a boy: indeed it is never the right way. To be angry and sin not is a different thing, and has the highest sanction.

A man so humorous, so able, and so affectionate was bound to have many friends. Some of these, such as Luxmoore, Ainger, Mr. and Mrs. Warren-Cornish, were considerably older than himself. Even as a boy Arthur was never shy of older men. In the summer of 1881 a master took three of us for a long country excursion: Arthur walked with him the whole time, the other two followed awkwardly some distance behind. But from 1879 till the end, Herbert Tatham was his friend of friends. As boys in 1880-1881 and for nearly twenty years as masters they explored the country-side together. Ainger often went with them, and Arthur in particular was very fond of him. But the boy who in his Sunday questions illustrated the friendship of David and Jonathan by that of Mr. Tatham and Mr. Benson was right. Even in the holidays they were seldom separated for very long. Of the other masters there was not one to whom Arthur was indifferent: his large charity found something to like in all. Not unnaturally, in spite of the fact that the ordinary Eton shop was rarely talked at his table, he was the most popular host at Eton, and he could hardly help realising this. In consequence, it was undoubtedly a shock to him to find that many of the staff would not welcome

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him as Head Master, and he could not understand it. He failed to apply to his own case the undoubted fact that, however much a Liberal statesman may be respected by Conservatives, he will not be the man whom they would welcome as the most desirable Prime Minister. If Arthur himself had been a less kindly man, probably he would not have taken it so much to heart, and might even have smiled at his cantankerous colleagues; as it was, his optimistic outlook on human nature was shaken, because he felt that he had been betrayed. For many years he kept away from Eton, but latterly he realised very gladly and gratefully that no old boy was more welcome to his tutor than he himself to all his colleagues, and I have never seen him happier than when he came to Eton last December and read a paper to the Ascham Society, of which for so many years he himself had been not only the secretary but the inspiration.

I return to the old Eton days which were drawing to a close. Probably Arthur was beginning to feel the strain very great, and the grind of classical school work, in the value of which he had to some extent ceased to believe, almost intolerable. And all the while he was doing literary work to an increasing extent. Regularly, three days a week he would devote two evening hours, from 5 to 7, to writing. He had chosen, in the very recesses of his House, a tiny room which had no merit except inaccessibility. I believe no boy ever penetrated to it. Here he used to write. It is of course true that he

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wrote very easily and that he loved writing. Probably he thought of it as a relaxation rather than as an addition to his work; in any case, he persisted in the habit. The delightful stories in the *Hill of Trouble* were written for his own pupils about this time; or rather he had long been in the habit of telling those stories to his pupils on Sunday evenings, and when he realised how much they were appreciated he wrote them out and had them published. (It may be of interest to record that his friend Herbert Tatham suggested the story about the malevolent cat.) Much that he wrote was privately printed: controversies with Frank Cornish about Classical and English metres; English hendecasyllables of his own which included the lovely line, "Golden leaves incessantly drifting downwards", a line which he himself was the first to discover was a sapphic in hendecasyllabic company; "The Myrtle Bough"; a poem for an Ascham dinner which included not only the lines

And some were lay and some were clerical,  
And Donaldson was last,

lines which S. A. D. abundantly justified by coming in at the moment when Benson was reciting them, but the even more deservedly famous lines

I too have taught  
Divisions at the hottest of the year,  
And wooed in vain intelligent replies,  
What time the mild salubrious table-beer  
Streamed from the drowsy eyes.

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Arthur himself was no ascetic: he loved the good things of life hardly less than he loved sharing them with others. His sense of geniality and good fellowship made it impossible for him to diet himself while entertaining his friends: no one can quite escape the defects of his qualities, and after all the love of hospitality, when combined with a genius for entertaining, is one of the lovable traits in human nature, whereas constant insistence on some particular form of diet is one of the least attractive. Arthur himself would probably have admitted that his diet was not supremely wise, but would have said that it suited him in some ways (which was doubtless true), and anyhow that it did not matter so much as all that. Besides, so long as he was at Eton many walks and much bicycling kept him comparatively well: when later a motor superseded both, it was very different. This may not sound heroic, but Arthur was always too human to wish to be a hero. One very different temptation he never quite overcame. Even as a master he was too inclined to be introspective: he made perilous experiments of imagining himself in terrible situations; he seemed at times to be spinning some threads of his stories from his very vitals. Fortunately the claims of work at Eton (no one did his school work more thoroughly or devoted more time to pupils) allowed him little leisure for such thoughts; but the tendency was noticeable even in those days. But far more noticeable throughout his life was his sympathy, and sympathy comes from

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unselfishness and absence of all jealousy. Arthur Benson cared much for himself but not less for others. I have never known a more generous nature. Writers of verse are proverbially jealous of one another, but Arthur rejoiced in the success of any friend, even if he thought that he himself had failed where his friend had succeeded. *O! si scripsissem* he has written to a colleague with affectionate enthusiasm. Certainly even in those busy Eton days, any sign of special thought, *e.g.* in the setting of Remove Verses, was sure to be rewarded by Arthur's grateful recognition. Indeed his notes and his letters were no less lovable than his conversation. "Your verses have made all the difference to me this after twelve", he would write to a colleague before going into Boys' dinner. When I myself began to write English verses in the 'nineties he was almost the first to discover it, and he wrote urging me to let him see more, doing in fact spontaneously all and more than all that I should have dared to ask of my most intimate friend. Sometimes he would make a suggestion or a correction of which I eagerly availed myself. And I know that my own case was not exceptional. Just this I would like to add. Excellent men and women who are not jealous on their own account are often jealous on behalf of others whom they hold dear. The schoolmaster, for instance, may perhaps be forgiven for being a partisan where his own House is concerned, or a sister when her brother's interests are at stake. But Arthur Benson was never a partisan any more

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than Mr. Stanley Baldwin is a partisan. And that is the first indispensable qualification for the leadership of a school or a nation. Further, Arthur Benson was supremely sensitive in the best sense, and such sensitiveness is a *sine qua non* for head masters and Prime Ministers.

Only one thing further is necessary: to suffer and be strong. If Arthur could have attained to that, he would have been more heroic certainly, but nothing could have made him more lovable than he was.

### III

#### (I) "BENSON'S"

By E. H. RYLE



### III

#### (1) " BENSON'S "

By E. H. RYLE

IN the following pages I have attempted to write of Arthur Benson as he appeared to me when I was a boy in his House between 1899-1903. When I sat down to my task I said to myself that I would obliterate from my mind anything which I had learned about him at a later date which might modify the impressions formed in the days of my youth: My object was to paint a picture from memory of the House-master, and I soon found that, in some respects at least, my memory had not played me false. Little as I realised it at the time, Arthur Benson's personality had impressed itself indelibly on the tablets of my mind, and though the execution of the picture of the man is—as I well know—weak and amateurish, yet it is, indeed, a true picture. Nevertheless I would ask the reader to bear in mind that the opinions, impressions, and judgments here set down are personal and individual. Occasionally the collective " We " has been substi-

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tuted for the individual "I"; but this only occurs when I have definitely felt justified in voicing the opinions of others besides myself without fear of contradiction. What my predecessors in the House between 1892 and 1899 felt, what my contemporaries felt, and what I felt about our Tutor, cannot in the nature of things have been identical. *Quot homines, tot sententiae*. But I do not think it is an act of rashness on my part to affirm that the impressions I formed of Arthur Benson, and the regard which I had for him, both then and afterwards, were shared by the great majority of those who had the privilege of calling him "my Tutor".

In September 1899 Arthur Benson entered into possession of Godolphin House, the solid and dignified red brick edifice, standing slightly recessed, and abutting on the southern end of Judy's Passage. It is to-day, I suppose, one of the oldest of the Eton Houses. In my time it was flanked by "Broadbent's" on the one side and "Radcliffe's" on the other. By that date "Benson's" was well established—"matured", one might say. In the preceding half it had quietly and unostentatiously carried off the House Cricket Cup, rather to the surprise of the rest of the School. But though I entered the House as a new boy a bare two months after this great event, I do not think I should ever have been aware of it but for the presence of the "Cup" on the

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dining-room table. House Cups did not mean a very great deal to Benson, or to “Benson’s”. Of the history of “Benson’s” before my arrival, its steady growth, and its vicissitudes (if it had any), I know next to nothing. I, together with the eight other new boys in that autumn “half”, took “Benson’s” for granted as a long-established institution.

From 1899 to 1903 I lived and flourished tranquilly at “my Tutor’s”, and then, suddenly and unexpectedly to most of us boys, he was gone from amongst us. In my last school year—that year, which seemed to pass so rapidly, in which, as Captain of the Games, and as a member of “Pop”, I first tasted the sweets of power and position—the House was taken over, lock, stock, and barrel, by A. M. Goodhart, previously master in College. One of the greatest regrets of my young life was that “my Tutor” had left before I had attained to that eminence in the House which would have entitled me to sit on his right hand or his left at dinner or supper, and to share in that “table talk” of his in which he excelled. One of his old boys—now himself a master at Eton—writes to me that “the topics of conversation round about A. C. B. at dinner were more varied and less ‘shoppy’ than at any other House. Of course *he* was mainly responsible for that. I remember being astonished to hear from a fellow at another House how boring it was being next to his tutor at dinner. In my innocence I had supposed

all tutors talked like A. C. B.! Those innumerable stories (not one of which I can remember to order), recurring as they did, but at long intervals, and always with improvements! How delighted he was if you told him a good one! Eyebrows bent approvingly on you; and finally face raised ceilingwards and a shake or two of the great shoulders. He *was* an old dear! ”

But I must return to my own reminiscences.

Recalling my sensations as a “ new boy ”, it is now easy to realise what a *friendly* House it was. The new boy fresh from a recent study of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, or of some more lurid “ yarn ” in *The Boy's Own Paper* or *Chums*, found with relief, or in some cases perhaps with a tinge of disappointment, that at “ Benson's ” bullying did not exist, that fagging was reduced to a minimum, and that caning, either by the Captain of the House or by the two or three members of “ Pop ”, was so rare as almost to be unknown. Comparing it with other Houses, as I was able to do by the end of my time at Eton, I can say that “ Benson's ” was distinguished by an air of urbanity and *laissez faire*.

By what process this distinguishing characteristic had been attained I cannot definitely say—none of us thought about it, but took it for granted. It is, however, fairly safe to assume that for seven years it had been tacitly encouraged and fostered by “ my Tutor ” with such success that by the time of my arrival the House possessed what the writer of the

paper which follows has happily described as “a distinctive air” of its own.

As Lower Boys we did not see a great deal of “my Tutor”; but whether it was in pupil-room, or on the occasion of his evening round of the House, or on any other occasion, we all had, I think, much the same feeling for him, a feeling compact of respect, friendliness, trust, and reliance, with perhaps—when we were very young—just a little awe. He was so *very* big and massive, his eyebrows so bushy, his frown so Jovellike. To me, as a new boy, the big boys of the House, especially the brothers Jack and George Lyttelton, seemed veritable giants; but even they seemed reduced to reasonable proportions in the presence of “my Tutor”, especially when the latter was arrayed in cap and gown. Arthur Benson’s gown, I am convinced, was unsurpassed by that of any other master’s—even Dr. Warre’s himself—for voluminousness, length, and silkiness. He never wore a shabby gown, and when proceeding majestically along the street he had a peculiar trick of drawing the folds of it around him, which caused him to have the appearance of a Roman Senator draped in a toga of an unusual colour.

We certainly were impressed by his bulk. I remember one Sunday (but this was perhaps in 1902–3) drawing the attention of a friend to Bishop Welldon and “my Tutor”, who happened to be standing within a few yards of each other outside upper Chapel. Having some hazy recollection that both

had been in their time mighty footballers, I remarked to my friend what an appallingly hefty pair they would have been to encounter if playing on the same side at "long behind" and "in goal". My friend entirely agreed, but added the qualification that "Now, at any rate, it would be fairly easy to elude them!"

But if, in those early days, we were impressed by his external appearance, we were equally impressed—and gratified—by the benevolence which he invariably displayed to the most insignificant amongst us, as well as to the great ones. Even the most unobservant small boy could not but note the rapidity with which his whole expression could be transformed. In a moment the heavy frown, which was his normal expression, would vanish, the face would light up and become humorous and almost jovial, the blue eyes would twinkle and seem less pent within the heavy eyebrows, and on occasion he would give vent to a deep chuckling laugh, easy and spontaneous, with head well thrown back. That aspect of the man was not so rare as not to put us quickly on comfortable terms with him. I am sure he went out of his way to be kind to the smaller boys and to put them at their ease. I felt that instinctively. But just as instinctively I felt that he was terribly shy of us, quite as shy as some of us were of him. And now I realise what a continual effort he must have been making. For the constitutionally shy man there is no shyness so devastating as that of an adult with

a small boy, surpassing in some ways the shyness of a man with a maid. But “my Tutor” succeeded in conquering it, and to the end of his time as a House-master continued to go out of his way to put the small boys at their ease.

I remember as clearly as if it had happened yesterday my first hour in his pupil-room. Some fourteen or fifteen of us were sitting there grinding out our weekly toll of Latin verses, we new boys probably still ignorant of the names of those senior to us by a year or two. I had delayed, mainly owing to shyness, taking up my attempts at verse-making for the customary inspection by “my Tutor”. He, looking up from his desk, noted this omission and said, “*Edward*, bring up your verses and let me see how you are getting on”. Now the small Etonian does not expect his House-master to address him by his Christian name, and “my Tutor” did not in fact address many of the boys in his House by anything but their surnames, except in the case of brothers, when it was convenient to differentiate them. But A. C. B. was my godfather, and, without doubt, he intended to be “kind” and put me at my ease. On this occasion he was not as successful as he wished to be, and it was a hot and confused small boy who brought up the verses for inspection, fully conscious that the ears of all the other boys had been pricked at the sound of that “*Edward*”, and that every eye in the room was fastened on the bearer of that name. No sooner was pupil-room over, and we were dis-

persing, than a ribald voice called out, "Hullo, there's *Teddy*", and a nickname which stuck to me for the rest of my schooldays had been invented.

The reference to pupil-room calls to mind a typical instance of "my Tutor's" unceasing literary preoccupations, and his never-failing patience and observance of his duties as a master. While we sat in rows painfully evolving hexameters and pentameters, "my Tutor" sat in an alcove by a window at a small writing-table, almost invariably—during 1899-1900 certainly—littered with printers' proof-sheets. (A glance at the list of his published works will explain the fact that he was almost always surrounded by proof-sheets.) It was customary for each boy, at intervals, to take up his verses for inspection and correction. However absorbed "my Tutor" might be in his revision or correction, he never showed the slightest sign of annoyance or impatience at the continual interruptions he had to put up with. The proofs were brushed aside, and he devoted his whole attention to the various sets of halting verses which were laid before him. Not merely did he point out errors and cross them out, but, with pen dipped deep in the red-ink pot, composed anew or re-wrote whole lines for us in his thick, cursive, but always legible handwriting. It may be of interest to those who did not know him personally, to receive assurance that he never allowed his literary pursuits, multitudinous though they were, to interfere in the slightest degree with his School duties.

It was in pupil-room, too, that peccant lower boys had to show up and obtain his signature to their “yellow tickets”—small bits of yellow paper torn from a counterfoil book, on which exasperated form masters recounted their misdeeds and delinquencies for the information of their House-master, whose signature to them had to be obtained. All but the most exemplary characters, at some time or another, qualified for an occasional yellow ticket. In most cases “my Tutor” glanced cursorily at them, asked a question or two, and after a slightly sarcastic and admonitory comment dashed off his familiar signature. Rumour had it that some daring individuals, relying on “my Tutor’s” disinclination to let yellow tickets influence him to the extent of discussing the circumstances which caused them with the form master who had issued them (especially if the latter happened to be a science or mathematical master with whom it was conjectured A. C. B. was not on very intimate terms), would forge his signature and dutifully show them up. But I cannot speak with certainty on such matters, and anyhow rumour is a lying jade.

But the boy who habitually amassed yellow tickets really did annoy “my Tutor”. He strongly objected to any boy of his developing into an habitual delinquent. Most of us felt this, and successfully avoided yellow tickets. But I well remember the exasperation which a certain pupil of his—not a member of his House—caused him. This individual

had the knack of getting on the wrong side of every form master he was "up to", and almost invariably made a weekly offering to "my Tutor" of torn, crumpled, and dirty tickets, retrieved one by one from the depths of various pockets. After a few weeks of this procedure, "my Tutor" gave him up in despair to be summarily dealt with by the "Head". Words seemed to fail him. It was not in his nature to be harsh or severe, but he felt genuine pain and annoyance that any pupil of his could be "such a fool" as to behave himself in such a way. The typical "scug", the small boy who seemed to glory in doing silly things, who was riotous, untidy, or absolutely lazy, was anathema to him. Whilst, with barely concealed interest, we watched him, frowning heavily, inspecting with a slightly perplexed and puzzled expression the dingy tokens of our fellow-pupil's shortcomings, we must have felt that he was saying to himself, "How in the name of goodness can any boy be so foolish as to deserve these things? It is so easy to avoid them, so easy and so much more pleasant to make school life a tranquil time, without causing annoyance to form masters and incurring pains and penalties."

A tranquil life! Yes, I think that was what Arthur Benson aimed at himself, and what he desired for all the members of his House.

There are many types of House-master, and it is impossible to say which type most nearly approximates to the ideal. And, again, what manner of man

is the ideal House-master? Out of a House of forty boys I suppose no two of them would agree in their definition.

“My Tutor” certainly was not of the hearty, strenuous type. He did not—in my time—play any games, or take much interest in them. He rarely, if ever, came to watch a House match. But I do not think that even the most athletically inclined amongst us experienced any sense of disappointment at this: we did not expect it of him, and probably, subconsciously, we all felt some little disdain for rival House-masters who might be seen on the touch line, anxiously watching the efforts of their House XI., and urging them on with voice and gesture. A. C. B. was “not that sort”, and we should have considered him an arch-hypocrite if he had done anything of the kind. But he always knew what his House was doing, and never exhibited the slightest contempt for athletic prowess or successes on river or on field. But we were fully aware that athletic “shop” bored him, and we refrained from indulging in it, at any rate to excess, in his presence.

As far as my recollection goes, I should say that he never made any definite attempt to enthuse his boys over anything, whether in work or play. I may be wrong, but I do not think so. I had the misfortune never to be up to him (*i.e.* in his form for school work), and out of the generations of boys who were up to him there may be some who will contradict me in this assertion. But as a House-

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master I do not think he ever tried actively to create enthusiasm. The things "my Tutor" loved most of all, things beautiful or elevating in themselves, the beautiful in literature and in art, examples of nobility of character in real life or in legend, for all such things his love, appreciation, and relish were so deep and unconcealed that any boy with a suitably receptive mind must have been infected by him to some extent. But he never obtruded those deep but half-concealed enthusiasms of his. Only those who were able to meet him half-way, or nearly half-way, could share them with him. There are no doubt many men alive to-day who would say that they owed their love of classical literature, or the Elizabethan dramatists, or the masterpieces of Italian art to Arthur Benson's influence and stimulating conversation in their youth, and even declare that he *created* an enthusiasm in them. I repeat, I may be wrong, but I doubt it. If there were some original predisposition or inclination for such things, lying perhaps half dormant in the boy, Arthur Benson might delicately and almost imperceptibly foster and encourage them; but he did not instil or create them. I do not think his unquestionably shy nature would ever have allowed him to do so.

Some may regard this as a distinct lack or shortcoming in the man—and perhaps it was. But if there was no obvious attempt to incite us greatly either in work or play, yet somehow we all felt that

there was a certain standard of performance, a spirit of aspiration, which he expected from us. The boy who took some pride in his work, or showed a keenness for some hobby, however trivial it might be—stamp-collecting or caricaturing, for example—would feel conscious of a certain sympathy emanating from his tutor, and the boy who was striving to secure his “Upper Boats” or “Racquet Choices” felt that tacit sympathy just as much as his fellow who was devoting a few hours of his spare time to “swotting” at Extra Books, or in working for a School Prize. I recollect that he always encouraged us to go in for “Extra Books”. An examination in a book of Virgil and one of the books of the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* took place annually. It was not a compulsory examination, but those who entered for it and attained a certain measure of success in the examination were able to add the marks gained in it to the sum total of their marks obtained in “Trials”, and very often this addition made all the difference between an ordinary and a double Remove.

“My Tutor” permitted those of us who heroically gave up a certain amount of our leisure time to preparation of these Extra Books to sit in his study and make use of cribs or translations of the specified books, copies of which he always provided for us, specially bound in stiff yellow buckram, and secreted in a certain drawer of his writing-table. He always looked round with an appreciative glance

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whenever he came into his room and found some of us deep in our Extra Books.

The boy who, in his leisure hours, read for amusement or instruction invariably found him ready to discuss books and authors. He would make tentative suggestions as to further reading, but always in a slightly diffident manner, and he rarely criticised our choice of authors. During my first year at Eton I discovered in the School Library a complete set of Dumas' novels (translated) and the works of Seton Merriman. Every night when "my Tutor" made his round, he would find me, in bed, reading one or other of these authors. So far as I can recollect, he displayed no great enthusiasm or admiration for the creator of Aramis and Porthos or the author of *The Sowers* and *Barlasch of the Guard*. On one occasion he found me struggling with an essay on Archbishop Laud, and at a loss for a vital date. He confessed that he was quite unable to give the necessary information, and added in a slightly shamefaced manner, "and I actually wrote a book about him once". This confession, I remember, for some reason or other, encouraged me considerably in my labours!

Unless he was giving a dinner party, or had gone out to one, Benson never missed his evening round of the House. Between 9.15 and 10.15 he visited every boy's room. If we did not feel in the mood to converse with him we blew out our candles and feigned sleep; but that, I am sure, happened very

rarely. To be able to converse easily and naturally with forty different boys on practically every evening of the “half” necessitates the possession of great good nature and tact. Of those two qualities “my Tutor” had no lack, and it was usually with a sense of pleasurable anticipation that we heard his ponderous tread ascending the creaking stairs. Small boys or big boys, he treated us all as highly civilised beings and listened to our conversation with a certain deference which was almost flattering. To the older boys he was on occasions astonishingly frank. He would discuss, and even criticise in a friendly manner, other masters, and often delighted in applying some apposite and humorous adjective to their persons or idiosyncrasies. He would gleefully listen to our attempts to imitate their mannerisms and phraseology, so long as these attempts were not too ribald or disrespectful, and he himself would cap our attempts, or supplement them, with some facetious and epigrammatic remark. I wish I could remember many more of those phrases in which he so vividly described the subject of our conversation. Here are one or two of which I have been reminded, the points of which will be appreciated by Etonians.

To one of his dearest friends he once referred as: “Old Ainger his voice husky with *nurture*”. Of the musical Dr. Lloyd, then organist of Eton College Chapel, he said, “Most of us have to struggle with the beast within us; Lloyd has to struggle with the bird”. Of another Eton master (to whom no dis-

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respect is implied): "Henry Broadbent, lunging down the Datchet Road like a steamer with one of its paddles out of action".

With the exception of the evening round, he rarely visited the boys' portion of the House. One never-to-be-forgotten occasion on which he did is indelibly printed in my memory. I think it was during my first half, when a horrible invention, sufficiently explained by the words "water pistols", was in vogue among the smallest boys. Three or four of us, one dark Saturday evening after lock-up, were lying ensconced in a friend's room, concealed by curtains, "burry", and arm-chair, and armed with a supply of these pernicious weapons, ready charged, awaiting the expected entry of the owner. The door opened, and several well-directed jets of water were discharged at close quarters, from front and flank, on to the face and person of—"my Tutor", who was in evening dress! He started back into the dimly lit passage and, with a disgusted exclamation of "Weally, weally, this is beyond a joke", retreated downstairs to change his soaked garments. The disgruntled sharp-shooters spent the rest of the evening in considerable dismay as to the probable outcome of their escapade, but beyond a caustic remark to each of them on their childish and "scuggish" behaviour, when he visited them during his "rounds", "my Tutor" never made any further reference to the incident.

Outside of his House Benson was, I imagine, not

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very well known to the great majority of boys, with the exception of those who were, or had been, up to him in school. He never was a “character”, on a par with Mitchell (Mike) or Austen Leigh (The Flea) or Walter Durnford. He was not, perhaps, at Eton long enough to have become a tradition, or for his eccentricities to have crystallised. He never earned a regular nickname among the boys. A half-hearted attempt to fasten one on him—Big Ben—was quite unsuccessful. He was perhaps too careful of his dignity, too conscious of himself and too much a man of the world to become a character among the fraternity of Eton masters.

I have omitted to refer to a notable illustration of “my Tutor’s” versatility and his readiness to sacrifice time which was precious to him. On Sunday evenings in winter, for about forty minutes before supper he would “tell a story” to any members of the House who cared to listen to it. Most of the Lower Boys and a good number of the Seniors made a point of attending. A few minutes before the appointed hour we used to assemble in his dark and deserted study. There was considerable competition for the sofa and arm-chairs; those who failed to obtain a seat of any kind sprawled upon the floor. Exactly at the appointed moment “my Tutor” would emerge from his little privy writing-room, which was rather a mystery to us. To this day I don’t know exactly where it was. He would turn up the light in a green-shaded reading-lamp

on a little table, bury himself in his great, deep leathern arm-chair by the side of the table, frown prodigiously at his hands clasped before his face, and from out of a deathly stillness inquire, "Where had we got to?" Nobody ever replied, and after a short pause he would briefly indicate the point at which he had arrived the preceding Sunday, and then steadily, but not monotonously, and in a low conversational tone of voice, with never a check, he would narrate, what was to me, at least, and (I know) to most of his audience, an absorbing tale. I am afraid I cannot recall the substance and plot of many of those "Eton Nights' Entertainments"; but I do remember that shortly after its publication in 1903 I started to read *The Luck of the Vails*, by E. F. Benson, "my Tutor's" brother. I wondered why it seemed familiar, and then it flashed upon me that the story, no doubt in a less elaborate form, had been spun out to us on the ten or eleven Sunday evenings of (I think) the winter half of 1899-1900. I imagine that A. C. B., after realising the pleasure it had given to a youthful audience, passed on the outline of the plot to E. F. B.,—but I write subject to correction.

No one who ever heard him could deny that "my Tutor" was a glorious story-teller.

I think most of us believed that our tutor, like some great spider spinning an unending silken thread, reeled out, spontaneously, and without premeditation, those enthralling tales.

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At a later date I was told that he had carefully written them out, at least in outline, in advance. I would not believe it, and I do not choose to believe it now.

I loved those Sunday evenings. The darkened room, the little pool of light created by the green-shaded lamp, the silence of the listeners, a silence which could be felt, the blurred outline of the huddled-up figure of the big man, half in, half out of the light, the quiet, even flow of words, the instructive feeling that the maker of the romance was quite as interested in its evolution as his audience, and quite as uncertain as they were as to what was going to happen next,—I can experience again those sensations and picture that scene as if it were but last Sunday! *That* was the sort of thing which made some of us at "Benson's" appreciate our parents' selection of a House-master! Did any other busy House-master voluntarily sacrifice part of his Sunday evening to the telling of tales to his lower boys? I never heard of one.

I should imagine that, during my time at any rate, there was very little friction in the House. It ran itself, and all went smoothly and easily. And in this connection I cannot omit a reference to Arthur Benson's "dame", Mrs. Cox, who for many years assisted him in the management of the House, and relieved him of much of the routine work which falls to the lot of a House-master. I have a letter of "my Tutor's" in which he

refers with chagrin to the fact that Mrs. Cox had been ordered away for a complete rest and would be absent for the whole of one half. He was obviously looking forward with some dismay to the prospect. I am sure that the great majority of his boys shared with him in after years grateful memories of the kindest and most charming "dame" at Eton.

In the foregoing pages I have tried to give some account of what I imagine we as boys thought about "my Tutor". Schoolboys either discuss and analyse their House-master's idiosyncrasies very minutely, or else they hardly discuss them at all. The latter was the case with Benson and "Benson's".

After the lapse of nearly a quarter of a century, during the whole of which time I am glad to say I could call him my friend, right up to May 28, 1925, when I shook hands with him for the last time at one of those dinners at the Fishmongers' Hall which were such a delight to him, I find that my schoolboy impressions need little if any modification.

If asked I should probably say that my opinion to-day is that he was a good and conscientious school master, but was not "cut out" to be one. He never became pedagogical in manner or appearance, but was always a pleasant, cultured, and refined English gentleman of literary tastes, who, by accident rather than design, had taken up school-mastering, without any definite and fixed desire to

teach, or mould, or influence the rising generations. Such desire as he may have had was rather that of a writer than that of a pedagogue.

Literature, or, rather, the itch to write, and to write lucidly and expressively, was in his blood. How he managed to write all that he did without neglecting his professional duties was always incomprehensible to his friends and acquaintances. At certain times of the day, and, I believe every day, he used to retire to a small writing-room, not his study, where he was quite inaccessible, and where it was understood he was never to be disturbed. With this exception he was always accessible to his boys, and to casual callers.

During the last quarter of a century, through his published works, Arthur Benson has become known to a vast circle of readers all over the English-speaking world. To many of these he has become, in a literary sense, "a friend". Some of these friends may, perchance, be interested to learn from these pages what sort of impression the author of *The Upton Letters*, *The Thread of Gold*, and the *Collected Poems* made upon a boy who lived under his roof in the Eton days.

My attempt to set down what manner of man Arthur Benson the School master was, is, I fear, in many respects ineffectual and superficial. But if I have succeeded in implying that always and most conscientiously he carried out his duties and obligations as a school master, that kindness and benevol-

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ence were always and without stint extended by him to the most insignificant of his pupils, and that all who were ever in the position to refer to him as “my Tutor” could, if they would, ever after claim him as their lifelong friend, I have not entirely failed in what I set out to do.



*Hills & Saunders.*

|           |             |              |            |            |           |           |          |          |          |          |
|-----------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Holt mi:  | ELLISON.    | BARNES.      | FORTESCUE. | NELTHORPE. | DUNCOMBE. | SEYMOUR.  | BEAUFON. | HOPE.    | EGERTON. | DALTON.  |
| COCHRANE. | APER ROMBY. | MONTGOMERIE. | HOLT mi:   | RYLE.      | STRUTT.   | CAMPBELL. | ELIOT.   | MAUDE.   | CORROLD. | DE GREY. |
|           |             | BALGOSIE.    |            |            | CADOGAN.  |           |          | A. C. B. | COMPTON. |          |
| Holt mi:  | LUTTRELL.   | WAKO.        |            | NORTHCOTE. |           | BALFOUR.  |          | GWATKIN. |          | WYNDHAM. |

"BENSON'S" (1903).



### III

#### (2) " BENSON'S "

By MARK STURGIS

" WHAT House are you in? "

" Benson's."

I do not think the answer was given with any particular pride when one's father's friends, or some other fellow's " people " put the question, but certainly it was given with confidence,—confidence that it would produce the rejoinder, " Oh! Benson's ", in a tone which implied, even if the words were not actually added, " Jolly good House ".

And a good House it was—none better—a House with an " Air ", an atmosphere ; a House like a great man who needs no advertising trumpeter, who goes his way sure of himself without fuss or pother, effective without effort. So it was with Benson's. What other Houses thought of " Benson's ", " Benson's " didn't know, and most certainly didn't care. There was nothing pharisaical, nothing exclusive about this; it was just that " Benson's " was all right, and knew it, and that was an end of the matter.

My first impressions of Eton are my first impressions of "Benson's". A very small boy in a very small room, with very new clothes and a hat which hadn't had time to get brushed the wrong way, to whom everything was new,—excitingly, and rather alarmingly, new. In later years it has been my lot to meet some of the great ones of the earth. The condescending hand of royalty has been extended to me. I have spoken with dukes. I have addressed peers of the realm by their christian names with an assumed air of easy indifference. I have even been presented to some of our leading actors. But, among them all, where can I find one figure to compare in awe-inspiring majesty with the fellows at the top of the House when I was a new boy?

Percy Lubbock, my first fag master, how incredibly old and stately he appeared to my young eyes, so that bringing him a piece of toast seemed like offering nourishment to the Archbishop of Canterbury; Willy Finlay, Captain of the Eleven, and, I suppose, the best wicket-keeper Eton ever had; the Lytteltons—Jack and George—whose scholastic distinctions were eclipsed by the array of caps which hung from the corners of their pictures; Leo Myers, whose flowing moustache, before Charlie Chaplin set another fashion, made of him the "Beau Sabreur" immortalised by Ouida—it was at these magnificent figures that my childish eyes goggled in wonder—it was this small coterie of super-men

who were, to me, “Benson’s” in those early days. Realisation of “my Tutor” as an active force came much later, and even then did not chase from my mind my original impression that “Benson’s” was not Benson but the boys of “Benson’s”—that here was no absolute Monarchy but a Republic.

Speaking of the Lytteltons reminds me that I had my father’s authority for the story of a prophecy by Miss Evans which was only wrong in her estimate of her own wonderful vitality. The Lytteltons—three of them—and the Sturgises, my two cousins, my brother and myself, were at “Benson’s” as it were by accident. Our respective fathers had all been at “Evans’s”, and when we were still at the lamentable stage of regarding milk as the only beverage, they sought to put us down for “Evans’s”, and to each had Miss Evans replied that Eton would know her no more long before any of us were of public school age. “Put your boys down for Arthur Benson’s,” she said; “he will have the best House in Eton after I am gone”; and, in due course, to “Benson’s” we all went, and stayed our span and left, leaving “Evans’s” and Miss Evans STILL flourishing.

I have said that realisation of “my Tutor” came slowly. I doubt if it fully came at all till Eton days were far behind us. Probably every House is, to a greater or lesser extent, a Republic, or, if a Monarchy, a Monarchy strictly limited. It is impossible to imagine a House in which the boys do not hold

much power to make or mar, though the House-master be by nature as tyrannical as Nero or as autocratic as Buonaparte, and there was nothing of the tyrant or autocrat about " my Tutor ". I myself love power; I regret extremely that I have not got any. I should be very happy if people fawned upon me and trembled at my frown. Positions which carry with them such delights are rare in these degenerate days, and unfortunately I do not occupy one of them. Few do. Even the King may be courteously contradicted. The clergyman alone, secure in his pulpit, shares with the schoolmaster the right to talk nonsense, to utter platitudes, to be unjust, to be egotistical, before an audience who may not answer back. But even so, you may rise in your pew, if you have the nerve to do it, and stalk out of church if the preacher has sufficiently affronted you. Not so the schoolboy; he must endure to the end. I find myself often saying that I do not like schoolmasters. I do not know why I say this, because most of the schoolmasters that I know I like very much indeed. I think that what is in the back of my mind is that I don't like a certain type of schoolmaster, met with more often, thank goodness, in fiction than in real life. I did meet one of them once. I was staying in the country, and I rode over with my host to a neighbouring school. My host was the owner of the place, and he had some business with his tenant. We found him with his boys, and so long as we were all together he acted the perfect school-

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master for our benefit. He addressed facetious pleasantries to the boys, and never lost an opportunity of patting on the head any victim within reach. With every word and gesture he seemed to say to us, “ See what a happy family party we are, how clever I am with the dear little chaps and how they adore me ”. I have never seen a more artificial creature. He was odious. I loathed him. If he was a successful schoolmaster, then by all laws, human and divine, “ my Tutor ” cannot have been one. But he was. I know nothing of scholarship. I was an idle Etonian. I am idle still—but this does not bar me from thinking that I know a good House when I see it, or, for that matter, a good House-master.

Benson’s was a good House—who denies it? and I have said—and again I fear no contradiction—that the boys in a House have much to do with that. But the House-master has more. In a Republic he is the President; in a Monarchy he is the King. To the new boy the big boys may be as gods, but they are, after all, the little gods of little boys, and behind them looms the Great One. I sometimes go to what are called “ The Movies.” I have seen films in which a stirring plot is woven round American Business. The heads of departments pass through gigantic factories into splendid offices, till finally we see the holy of holies where sits the “ President ” controlling millions of dollars and the destinies of thousands of his fellow-men. One glance at the picture and you know the man. The cold eyes under

beetling brows and the square jaw denote the ruthless man of iron at whose nod Trusts and Combines tremble, and crushed rivals commit suicide. It matters not that by the end of the evening the office boy will have saved him from ruin and disgrace, and incidentally have become engaged to his only daughter; in the heyday of his power he suffers no interference with his autocratic sway. No, "my Tutor" was not one bit in the world like that! There was nothing of the Managing Director about him, and his influence with us was the greater for that. Influence is, I think, the right word, an influence more negative than positive, and perhaps, for that reason, more subtly compelling. There is another word which was used by our ancestors without fear, but which in these days has become so abused that I hesitate to set it down. It is the word "gentleman". Cleanse it of its modern vulgarity, of the snobbishness of to-day, and apply it to Arthur Benson in its best sense, and in my judgement it goes far to explain him and his success. He was a gentleman to his finger-tips and treated us as such, and to some extent at least we reacted, and "Benson's" was the result. There was nothing haphazard about this. The last thing I want to do is to give the impression that "my Tutor" ruled us with an aristocratic aloofness. He knew quite clearly what he wanted his House to be, and the methods by which he considered it most certain that his claims would be achieved. And here we are in no realm of

guesswork, for it was his habit to talk of such things with surprising freedom to his pupils. This frankness of his was one of his most endearing qualities. The confidence and courtesy of an older man must always be flattering to one much younger, and where the relations are those of master and schoolboy, the boy who would not be uplifted and put upon his mettle by being talked to as an equal, almost consulted as if his opinion was of worth, cannot exist. Indeed, this habit of “my Tutor’s” could be almost embarrassing. I well remember him sitting on the end of my bed one night and discoursing on the methods of a colleague, to whom I happened to be “up” that half, with a freedom which was quite alarming.

I am sure that there was not a boy in the House who did not regard him with real affection, and if it was mixed with awe, it was awe entirely different from fear of a tyrant—but the fear of his disapproval was a very real thing. When, as a small boy, I was caught cribbing in my Division and waited after school, expecting immediate punishment, I well remember my dismay when I was merely told to tell “my Tutor”—to make my way alone to his study—to stammer out the story of my detected crime—to receive no punishment in the ordinary sense of the word, but a biting impression that I had fallen below his standard and in his estimation—here was punishment indeed!

“My Tutor” hated small niggling punishments for

this, that, and t'other thing, and would never impose them. There were many instances of petty offences, for which another would have unquestionably punished the offender, which he passed over with a half-humorous rebuke. One such was administered to my younger brother, though I, and not he, was the real culprit. My brother's temper in those days was easily roused; and having a year's advantage in height and weight, no becoming sense of chivalry deterred me from stirring the embers on many occasions. On one such, goaded to frenzy, he was telling me exactly what he thought of me, and had arrived at the expression "you bloody swine" when we became aware of "my Tutor's" figure in the doorway. "My dear Gerard!" he said; "no doubt a most expressive remark, but rather more suitable to the pothouse." And neither my brother nor myself heard any more of it. The fitting end to this story would be that we were so impressed by "my Tutor's" attitude that so vile an expression never passed our lips again, but, alas! all through life I have been handicapped by a partiality for the truth!

I have spoken of "my Tutor's" engaging frankness in talk, and I recall another instance of it which impressed me enormously at the time. Not that there was anything in it which might not have been said to one of riper years, but I was young enough to think that anything even remotely connected with religion was a matter which could not possibly be discussed in the spirit of criticism. The usual

schoolboy irreverences among ourselves were one thing; discussion with one’s tutor very much another. He was speaking of modern hymns—I forget in what connection the subject had arisen—and he said how deplorable it was (“deplorable” was a favourite word of his, and those who recall his pronunciation of the letter R will remember what an effective word he made it) that while England had great poets and masters of English, it seemed to be the general view that any words strung together were good enough for a hymn of praise or supplication addressed to one’s Maker. A few, such as “Lead, Kindly Light”, for instance, he said were really magnificent, but the majority were “deplorable”. “I really object most strongly”, he said, “to standing up in public and describing myself as a frail and trembling sheep.” What a picture! Come to think of it, was anything in the world less like a frail and trembling sheep than A. C. B.?

I suppose all schoolboys think that masters are an especially gullible race. We certainly prided ourselves enormously on the skill with which we kept our numerous misdeeds from “my Tutor’s” knowledge. I have since been assailed by considerable doubt as to whether we were quite as clever as we thought. “My Tutor’s” regular time for coming round the House and visiting us was when we were in bed before “lights out”. He would find most of us reading. A friend of mine had made the pleasing discovery that there was much ribald amuse-

ment to be found in the pages of Shakespeare, and nightly he regaled himself with the less decorous passages. But when "my Tutor" opened the door he was invariably reading the great speech of Henry V. We thought this the last word in skill and daring, but, looking back, I take leave to wonder whether there may not have been something of amused understanding in "my Tutor's" solemn commendation of my friend's literary taste.

Looking back on these pages, I realise how signally I have failed in my object, and it is inevitable that I should offer an apology for writing at all. I did not underrate the difficulty of trying to recapture the impressions of nearly thirty years ago, and I was encouraged to make the attempt by the sole consideration that it would be impossible for me to criticise—to say "here he was clearly wrong", "here he was probably right"—because as a critic I had no qualifications whatever. The most I could hope for was that being utterly ignorant of the House-master's art, and having a mind innocent of even the most elementary theories on the subject, I might by good luck succeed in making a picture of "my Tutor" as he appeared to his pupils. It is in no banal hope of receiving a polite conventional contradiction that I admit failure. Here is no picture of him, of his charm, his courtesy—perhaps that seems a strange word to use to express the attitude of any master to a boy in his House, but it expresses exactly what I mean—his sense of justice, his great

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*understanding* of us. He never drove us; he led us, and led us easily and gently; there were no great exhortations, no sermons, but there was a tone and a standard—not necessarily a moral standard—rather perhaps a standard of manners, as if being a member of his House entailed as a matter of course an obligation upon the individual to maintain a level of respectability not altogether unworthy of its founder. His understanding of us was human enough to secure very ordinary human boys from a standard too exacting, and even so I have no doubt that we often fell very grievously short.

Of the thousands who have passed through Eton, the number who have been in more than one House is practically negligible. The vast majority know one House and one House only. I who was at "Benson's" have no more knowledge of what it was like to be in any other Eton House than I have of the conditions in another school. I only know that we thought some Houses better than others and that we thought "Benson's" the best. It would not be for me to criticise "my Tutor's" methods even if I could—had Zimri peace who slew his master?—but anyway I could not if I would. We of "Benson's" ranked our House second to none, and I think it is not too much to claim that others with a knowledge of Eton rated our House among the best. That could not be the result of chance, nor could any captain of the House, or series of captains, or succeeding generations of boys lay claim to the credit. A good piece

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of work had been done; what of thought and care and study had been given to the work, whether it had been approached in the right way or the wrong way, I know not; but the work was good and the craftsman was "my Tutor".

### III

#### (3) "BENSON'S "

By the Hon. EDWARD CADOGAN, M.P.

THERE are few more difficult or more embarrassing tasks than to write an appreciation of a well-loved and intimate friend. When the subject of such an essay happens not only to have been an intimate friend but, in addition, to have fulfilled the function of a tutor, the task is rendered none the less formidable.

I remember hearing Arthur Benson, in the course of a discussion upon the relationship which must, as he thought, always inevitably exist between master and pupil, exclaim with a note of regret in his voice, "Once your tutor, always your tutor". The affection he conceived for those who had grown up under his care made him deplore that there should be such a barrier as too often separates tutor and pupil, hindering that mutual sympathy and understanding, the cultivation of which incidentally accounted for his own phenomenal success as a House-master and differentiated him from so many of his contemporaries at Eton.

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It was indeed in the light of a friend rather than in any other capacity that the boys of his House preferred to regard him both while they were at school and in after years. And yet, when I am asked to write a tribute to his memory, the aphorism "Once your tutor, always your tutor" seems to have some rather pertinent application. It seems almost irreverent to criticise the character of one whose ungrateful task it was to endeavour to form my own. But it is not only a natural diffidence on this account that makes me hesitate in the attempt. I am conscious that a strong prejudice, born of my intense affection and admiration for Arthur Benson, may render any estimate I have formed of his personality of less value than that of a detached critic, and may prevent it fulfilling those conditions which biography, if it is to be of any value whatever, necessarily and rightly demands. Be this as it may, no estimate of his character and achievements would be complete that did not include contributions from some of those whose inestimable privilege it was to be under his aegis at Eton.

At the time when I first made the acquaintance of my tutor, the majority of contemporary House-masters conformed to somewhat antiquated standards of magisterial conduct, both in their relations with the boys entrusted to their care and in their relations with the world in general. The idea that true friendship and sympathy could exist between tutor and pupil without loss of dignity on the one side

and a want of respect on the other was outside the philosophy of any save a very few of the younger and less orthodox of the assistant masters. If Arthur Benson did not actually found a new school of ideas in this respect, he was certainly one of the first exponents of a more enlightened system. In his written works he did not fail to ridicule the pedagogue or to vindicate his own liberal views on education.

In order to deal with boys with any degree of success it is requisite and necessary for a master to be possessed of a sense of humour, and, still more important, that he should remember the days of his youth. Arthur Benson fulfilled these conditions in a remarkable degree. By temperament he was peculiarly fitted to understand boys. As his books seem to indicate, his mind worked introspectively. His power of self-analysis was so acute that he experienced little difficulty in fathoming the minds of others. He was able, therefore, to sympathise with the ambitions of boys, to appreciate to the full their difficulties, to appraise correctly without overestimating their virtues, to make allowances for, without condoning, their moral frailties. He had the capacity, so rarely to be discerned in any man of middle age, for putting himself in the boy's place and thus realising the boy's point of view. I am inclined to believe that it was this characteristic more than any other that accounts for his conspicuous success as a master and explains the power that was his of eliciting the confidence of the most diffident among his pupils. It

was singularly easy to confide in him. Speaking from my own experience, I found it less of an ordeal to divulge the innermost workings of my soul to him than it would have been to almost any other living creature. To have confided in other Eton masters of his day in such a manner would, I feel, have been in many cases to invite misunderstanding or to court contempt. But it was otherwise with Arthur Benson. He was so intensely human, so intensely sympathetic, that the experiment was attended by no such risk. His kindly forbearance, his robust common sense, his wise judgment were always at the service of his boys. His timely advice, valued as advice rarely can be in this world, because there are so few qualified to give advice, was the reward of a confidence which was never disappointed nor misplaced.

He was singularly impartial and therefore eminently fair in his dealings with all and sundry of the boys who came under his influence. Such a compliment could not have been paid with any degree of justification to the average guardian of youth at Eton or elsewhere. To appreciate the merits of a boy whose merits are obvious does not argue any very great measure of discernment on the part of those who are set in authority over the youthful society of a great public school. It is a very common error among schoolmasters to take it for granted that because a boy is pre-eminently successful at work and games, and popular amongst his school-fellows, that therefore he must be a paragon of all the virtues

and must have an illustrious career in after life assured to him. An equally common mistake to which many masters and teachers are addicted is to assume that the mildly unsuccessful and insignificant youth can have no concealed merits or strength of character in reserve, and is therefore doomed to perpetual failure. An examination of school records should be sufficient to dispel illusion on both these heads, but the lesson too often passes unheeded. Arthur Benson discovered some good in every one and in the most unexpected quarters. He was neither blinded nor deceived by the ephemeral success which is probably, in nine cases out of ten, to be attributed to the fact that the successful boy has developed earlier than his peers in mind or muscle, if not in both, and is liable to be outstripped when the levelling process later comes into play. He admired success at school as much as any one else admired it, but he realised that the standards were not infallible, and further, he recognised other standards by which to judge the prospects of his boys, by no means universally recognised. He found something to admire or to approve of in youth of every type, prominent or insignificant as the case might be.

I shall never forget his expression of pained surprise on one occasion when, at one of the sittings of our House Debating Society, the subject under discussion being whether athletics occupied too prominent a place in the estimation of the school, one boy

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who bore a name inseparably associated with Eton cricket volunteered the remark that the only criterion by which success at school could be judged was proficiency in games. It was not because he ignored athletics as an essential part of education that Benson took exception to such a verdict. In his youth he had been something of an athlete himself, and I am convinced, from all I ever heard him say on the subject, he was prepared to agree that athletics should hold a high place in boys' esteem, but he rejected the idea that enthusiasm for games and sport should exclude all others. In common with every one who possessed a grain of common sense, he recognised what a supremely important rôle athletics played in the formation of character. He accepted the situation that, if there was to be any one particular criterion by which the authority and predominance of a boy over his fellows should be established, it might as well be proficiency in games. No one realised more than he the importance of a healthy influence in school life, and he believed that this element was best supplied by an enthusiasm for the athletic side of school routine. But his considered view of the matter left him free to encourage other proficiencies and to ensure that no boy should lose heart because his particular proficiency did not command any wide measure of youthful approval or admiration.

He never seemed to evince any very great ambition that his House should excel on the playing field. If success attended our efforts in that direc-

tion he was well enough satisfied, but our defeats he accepted almost too philosophically. If his House is to be judged by the number of athletic trophies that were won throughout the course of the twenty years in which it competed I am disposed to believe that it would hardly come out of the ordeal with flying colours, compared with some of the more famous Houses of athletic renown. To judge by experience I cannot help feeling that, had he taken a rather more apparent interest in this phase of Eton life, he would have infused success into his House in this direction just as pre-eminently as he infused it in other directions.

As a moral influence in his House and in the school I do not believe he ever had an equal. Here again, the secret of his success was undoubtedly to be found in his sympathy with the frailties of human nature. Having himself been brought up in a severely ecclesiastical atmosphere, partly on account of such an experience and partly in spite of such an experience, he was well fitted to be the moral instructor of youth. He knew the dangers which a too rigid system engenders, and he was doubtless determined to avoid those well-intentioned errors from which he had suffered in his youth, but which, on account of his strength of character, had left him unaffected. He certainly could not be described as a “muscular Christian”. I am disposed to believe that the type so described was somewhat repugnant to him, but his moral and religious views were bold and

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manly. In his religious teaching he pursued broad lines. There was no hard-and-fast doctrinal or dogmatic teaching. He gave to us a sound moral grounding through the medium of religion of an enlightened kind. There was nothing oppressive, or gloomy, or pessimistic about it. He found in worship the acknowledgement that man depends upon a Higher Power for guidance in every thought and deed. He found strength and consolation in his religion, and he imparted his quiet zeal to others. In his solicitude for our moral welfare he steered an even course between the two dangerous extremes of appearing to be over-anxious on the one hand or too indifferent on the other. Although he rarely displayed undue anxiety, I know that he suffered acutely in contemplating his responsibility in the matter. I once read a letter of his written to a parent concerning his son—a boy in his House—for whom he had a high regard and for whom he entertained a strong affection, but whose general mien, in spite of his regard and affection, gave him considerable anxiety. As a matter of fact, in this case there was no foundation for his fears, but the substance of the letter gave me some indication of the deep interest he took in the moral welfare of his boys. It was couched in terms which gave me some measure of the heavy burden of responsibility that weighed upon him night and day.

Arthur Benson, in the years when I was at Eton, before he had suffered from any of that series of

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nervous breakdowns which subsequently afflicted him and withdrew him into a hermit-like seclusion, was of a very sociable disposition, delighting to gather round his table at Eton men whom he found congenial—Maurice Baring, Howard Sturgis, Edmund Gosse, Herbert Tatham, and a host of others.

While I was in his House he did not seem to have any of those sombre misgivings as to his health which subsequently so altered his career and his manner of living. Perhaps the only indication of anything abnormal in his constitution was a habit he had on occasions of shutting himself up in his room and not allowing any one on any pretext whatsoever to disturb him. But I am disposed to believe that he indulged in this seclusion merely to pursue his literary work. At that time he was not the prolific writer he afterwards became. I think I am right in saying that until he left Eton he had not produced any of the works which have made his name a household word in two continents, and have conferred upon him affluence if not great riches. He was already known in literary circles as a poet. Queen Victoria, decidedly suspicious of Swinburne at one end of the scale and apparently indifferent to Alfred Austin at the other, had seemed to appoint Arthur Benson as sort of unofficial laureate. In any case, he was commissioned by Her Majesty to write verses on various melancholy and auspicious occasions. His genuine reverence for the Queen

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sufficiently counterbalanced his sense of humour to enable him to perform these uncongenial duties as adequately as ever any one has been able to perform them, and he became so favoured in royal circles that he was ultimately commissioned to edit Queen Victoria's letters. From the moment he left Eton until his death he never seems to have laid aside his pen. Although it is no part of my task to criticise his literary work, I would only say that I deplore his writings on one account, namely, that, in my judgement, they do not indicate to any one who was unacquainted with him personally the full strength of his character. Although he wrote as he spoke, his written word fails to produce a true impression of his individuality. To put my argument in another form, it would be difficult to convince any one who had formed an estimate of Arthur Benson's character solely from his writings that he was a man of great force of character and great strength of purpose. There is a morbid vein which runs through all his prose works. This may be accounted for partly as the result of those phases of mental distress which occurred at intervals after Eton had ceased to see much of him; but in those younger days of his, nothing could have been more virile, healthy, and robust than the normal condition of his mind, although he was always analytic and fastidious to a superlative degree.

The picture of Arthur Benson which dwells in my memory must be a very different one from that

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formed by his readers who only know him through the medium of his writings. I like to think of him as I knew him in those already distant days when I was a boy in his House. I can see him now as I write, a tower of strength, morally and physically, full of good humour and tactful sympathy, always ready with a kindly word of encouragement or praise, whichever the occasion demanded, always ready to place his experience and his judgement at the disposal of those who looked to him for guidance.

That he could have been Head Master of Eton I suppose is now an open secret. Whether the experiment would have been attended with unqualified success no one will ever know, but it is safe to say, in the light of experience, that few of those who have been responsible for maintaining Eton’s honour and Eton’s fame have made a more valuable or more lasting contribution to her history.



IV  
CAMBRIDGE DAYS

By STEPHEN GASELEE



## IV

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AFTER the interval, taken up with his editorship of the early part of Queen Victoria's letters, which followed his House-mastership at Eton, Benson came to live in Cambridge at the end of 1903, when I was reading for the classical tripos. I had known him well ever since I was in his division at Eton in 1897, and saw a good deal of him after he had settled down. He took a curious old house, called "The Old Granary", which backed on the river about fifty yards above the Granta Pool. It was a queer old structure, in which scarcely any two rooms were on the same level, and he did not seem to mind that it was rather damp, and undoubtedly infested with rats. His friends, young and old, were very welcome there, and I can remember many pleasant meals with him. I never cared much for the country walks and bicycle rides which were his ordinary form of exercise; but it was probably in the course of those expeditions that he was most intimate, at any rate at that time, with his Cambridge friends.

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He did not at first take much part in academic life. He had come from Eton, and from his very arduous editorial labours on the Queen's letters, rather tired, and he was unwilling to make a new start at once on educational matters. He was inclined later rather to regret that he had not done more; but when he was offered places on various "syndicates" (the directing bodies of University organisations and studies), he refused most of them, and devoted himself to writing. He had several books in preparation, and wanted to get them out. This period saw the appearance of volumes of essays, such as *The House of Quiet*, *The Hill of Trouble*, *The Isles of Sunset*—none of them, to my thinking, his best work, though undoubtedly popular—and he was occupied with preparation for the two excellent little biographies of Rossetti and Edward FitzGerald respectively, in the "English Men of Letters" series.

He had not been a year at the Old Granary when the event came which was to alter profoundly the whole of the rest of his life. He naturally saw much of his old friend and Eton colleague, Stuart Donaldson, who had been appointed Master of Magdalene on the death of the sixth Lord Braybrooke early in 1904. One day, he told me, he was out bicycling with Donaldson, who mentioned that Magdalene had to elect a Fellow, and that they were in considerable difficulties about it, as the College was then very poor, and the payment of an extra Fellowship would seriously depress the dividends of

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the other Fellows. "I wish we could find somebody who could afford to accept a Fellowship without income," said Donaldson. "Well, what about me?" replied Benson. Donaldson jumped at the idea and consulted the other Fellows, who were delighted with the proposal, and Benson was elected on October 8, 1904, and formally admitted on October 15.

He did not move into College for nearly a year, as there were no suitable rooms vacant. When the undergraduates went down at the end of the Easter term of 1905, he threw together two sets of rooms on the ground floor of what is called the Left Cloister of the Pepysian building, and made a very pleasant set, consisting of a sitting-room looking on to the garden, and a dining-room looking on to the second Court, with a bedroom between them. I can testify to their comfort—a little damp was their only trouble—for I afterwards lived in them for some ten years myself. The dining-room was painted in a scheme of blue and yellow, which was a favourite combination of his; the sitting-room upholstered with a blue-green tapestry, the wood-work chocolate with gold relief. Over the doors and on the mantelpiece were Latin texts, that over the doors being a rather depressing verse from the Psalms, *In imagine pertransit homo: sed et frustra conturbatur*. The inscription on the mantelpiece was always puzzling to visitors, for it recorded a little piece of restoration made at Eton many years

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before, which was not applicable to its new position. In these rooms Benson wrote one of the best of his volumes of essays, *From a College Window*, and I used afterwards to have a constant stream of visitors, especially from America in the summer months, who asked me to point out the exact window from which A. C. B. had looked out upon the world and recorded his opinion of it.

For the next two years I saw much less of him, as I left Cambridge for a time to take up a tutorship (for which he had recommended me) in one of the Royal Households, and I spent some of the happiest months of my life travelling in Egypt, Europe, and the Atlantic Islands. He was greatly interested in my doings, and we corresponded regularly. I came occasionally to Cambridge, and sometimes when he was in London he would be brought to luncheon at Kensington Palace, where he was always a most welcome visitor.

When I returned to Cambridge in 1907, I found him thoroughly at home in his new College, and indeed almost its leading figure. He was still keeping to some extent out of the main stream of University life, only taking posts on syndicates or committees of which the work definitely interested him (the University Press, for instance), but rapidly increasing his acquaintance and forming new and close friendships. Professor Alfred Newton, an old Fellow of Magdalene, died in June 1907, and in October Benson left his rooms in College and went

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to live in the Old Lodge, which had been Newton's house for some years. This was in the College grounds, almost touching the first Court, with which in former days it had been connected by a bridge or gallery. The Masters, until the nineteenth century, had some rooms in College and some in this building to the north of the Court, the whole being made up of the southern part of the present Old Lodge and what is now the College Library and the sets of rooms above it. In the days of Neville Grenville, who had a large family, the New Lodge was built some hundred yards north-east, and the Old Lodge, after some vicissitudes, formed the lodgings of a bachelor Fellow. I think Benson had found his rooms in College, pleasant as they were, a little cramped, and lacking room for his books and papers; he was glad to move into more spacious quarters, and there he stayed for the rest of his life. A few years later he was able to acquire a lodging-house next door up the street, and threw this, with considerable structural alterations, into the Old Lodge, so making a big, if straggling, house, with a very large dining-room, which we used to call his "baronial hall"; its height was of two stories, and he used it for large parties; and he was pleased to have two or three extra sitting-rooms and bedrooms for visitors. He was so comfortable in his house as completed that, when appointed Master, he refused to move to the New Lodge, and stayed in the Old Lodge to the day of his death.

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Benson had at once begun to see a great deal of the undergraduates of the College in a social way; but their numbers were increasing, and his move into the Old Lodge enabled him to entertain them more spaciouly and with greater convenience to himself. He would ask a couple of them to lunch almost every day when he had no other engagement, and he was soon on terms of intimacy with the whole College, bringing about a kind of family feeling perhaps almost unknown elsewhere. Up to the end of his life there were a few who were naturally closer friends than the rest. I shall not particularise individuals who are still alive and will always remember with gratitude their association with one of the kindest and most entertaining of men, but there is one who deserves a special mention—George Mallory, who perished last year in the final attempt on Mount Everest. Mallory, coming to Cambridge from Winchester, was already an undergraduate when Benson became a Fellow—a youth of great charm and personal beauty, even then a competent mountaineer and of distinguished attainments of mind as well as body. He soon became one of Benson's greatest friends, and was encouraged by him to write. He won a University prize for an essay on Boswell, which he afterwards elaborated into a book and published. Both then, and after Mallory left Cambridge to become a Master at Charterhouse, their close friendship continued, and letters and visits showed that it remained

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unimpaired until the news of his glorious end was telegraphed from India.

It was during these years that Benson rented a house called Hinton Hall, at Haddenham, about six miles south-west of Ely. It was an ugly shooting-box in origin, and it always seemed to me an unattractive spot; but he felt that he could get away there and be alone if he wanted, and he would go there in the vacations and sometimes for week-ends. He shared the shooting with Donaldson. There were no great bags, but a certain amount of mixed game, and he used to like getting a few moorhen, as to the proper treatment of which he and I could never quite agree. He thought that soup was their proper destiny, or occasionally cold, on toast; my vote went for their inclusion in a steak-and-kidney pudding. He tired of the place after a year or two—perhaps as he got to know his College more intimately and love it better.

A year or so after Benson had moved to the Old Lodge I went to Magdalene, first succeeding his old friend Percy Lubbock as Pepysian Librarian and afterwards elected a Fellow. From that time on until the War began, and even then by as many visits as circumstances allowed me to pay, I perhaps saw as much of him as any one else in Cambridge, and the impressions which follow are the result of the closest contact for the whole of the immediately pre-War years.

We dined every night in Hall, unless a College

Feast or a private dinner took us elsewhere, and I do not hesitate to say that, from a conversational point of view, those dinners, followed by an hour of port and coffee in the Combination Room, were *noctes cenaque deum* of a standard far above anything I have been so fortunate as to encounter elsewhere. The party was usually small—anything from three to seven people, except on Sundays, when Fellows brought in guests; the conversation general, with Benson always the leading spirit—conducting it almost where and how he would. Although he shone in all company, there were certain diners who perhaps brought him out more than others. If I had to give a name, I should say that Father Waggett, whom we had made a member of our High Table during his residence in Cambridge, himself a talker of a very high order, made Benson appear at his very best.

I wonder if it is possible to give any indication of the *manner* of his table-talk to any one who never heard it? Perhaps not. It sounds slight and mechanical to say that it consisted essentially of a series of perfectly apposite illustrations, varying in length from a simile to a full anecdote; these were inexhaustible in number, apparently never repeated, and applied without the least effort—they were neither “dragged in”, nor was the conversation deflected in order to introduce them. I would not, however, have it thought that Benson’s talk was in any way allusive; it was as direct as that of any man

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whom I have known, but it was ever lit up by those little stories, and his meaning, instead of being obscured or dimmed in outline, as it too often is by the *raconteur*, seemed to be the more clearly brought out by them, like a book whose pictures are in perfect harmony with its text.

In 1907 and 1908 came the first of the two periods of nervous breakdown which were so greatly to trouble his later life; his own impressions of it, published some time after, may be found in *Thy Rod and Thy Staff*. There seemed no particular cause for it, though at one time he suspected his teeth, and had some of them removed; and he was not overworked, or depressed by any external trouble. It started with a bad bout of insomnia, and when this passed away he was unable to pick up moral and intellectual strength: inability to write, always his greatest pleasure, was a sure sign of some deep-seated disorganisation. He withdrew himself from all but his closest friends in College, and was less seen even there; he found some alleviation in cards, and I used evening after evening to play bezique with him (it became piquet in later years). He tried leaving Cambridge for comparatively long periods, but no great result was effected; and I fear he was often very miserable. Then it suddenly cleared away—"it was like a blind being rolled up," he said—and he was at once his old self again. He returned to full College life and began accepting invitations to dinner—he was fond both of College

feasts and of smaller parties—and started on his writing again. It was a full period of literary production: *The Silent Isle*, *The Child of the Dawn*, and *Along the Road* of the essay type; and the admirable *Leaves of the Tree*, a collection of short biographies in which, in my opinion, he is seen at his very best. He also put together his poems, extending over a long series of years, and published them in a single volume.

His life in the five years which preceded the War was very full and happy. He aimed at making the personal acquaintance of every undergraduate in his College, and carried out his purpose by asking them to luncheon, two or three at a time, and he joined friends in more than one informal little club which met to dine in one another's rooms: there was one, I think, which gave him more pleasure than the rest, of which the chief members were Foakes-Jackson of Jesus, and Lawrence, Lapsley, and Barnes (now Bishop of Birmingham) of Trinity. His strictly academical work lay in two directions. In his own College he would take the essays of all the historical students, and of a good many others as well, about twice a term; his criticism of their productions, which was individual, was most helpful and stimulating, and a good many young men who have since begun to write have owed much to his help, pointing out faults of style and composition, and encouraging their endeavours to treat a subject attractively. To the University at large, and the junior part of it, he was best known by a series of lectures—few in

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number, perhaps four or five in a term—on some man of letters or literary movement. These lectures were generally fixed for the interval between tea and dinner, and as the attendance was large, they were given in the Hall of Magdalene. It holds some seventy or eighty people, and is lit only by candles in silver candlesticks, and a few in brass sconces on the walls: the Hall would be full of men sitting at the tables, with some on the stairs leading up to the Combination Room and in the gallery; on the dais, with a few extra candles to enable him to read his manuscript, stood Benson, a fine and imposing figure in his voluminous black silk gown, speaking in a voice that seemed low and just a little husky, but carrying with ease to the farthest corners of the Hall. These lectures were among the most universally popular of any given in Cambridge during the period.

In the summer—he never liked the heat—he got what exercise he could by walking and bicycling; but I think he enjoyed the winter more. He and I, with two or three other friends, had a little shooting only just outside Cambridge: it was between the Madingley and Huntingdon roads, beginning just past the Observatories and extending as far as the cross-road between Madingley and Girton College. He was a competent shot, though he would not have claimed any higher reputation; and I think that a day in October with a mixed bag of pheasants and partridges, with a certain amount of ground game,

gave him as much pleasure as any of his other distractions. He was particularly happy when his brother Hugh, who lived at Hare Street, on the old direct road between Cambridge and London, could come over and join us. When the shooting was over and we had gone back to College and tea, the two brothers would separate into different sitting-rooms in the Old Lodge, and correct their proofs until it was time for dinner in Hall, often followed by a game of Jacobi until bed-time.

So went on a full and happy life. At this time Benson found a new interest in an educational sphere outside Cambridge; he had been asked, before his illness in 1907, to join the Governing Body of Gresham's School at Holt, and he now served on it to the great advantage both of the school and of the Fishmongers' Company, who were responsible for it: from this came his happy association with the Company, about which something will be said later. The school was then under the charge of an original and active Head Master, Mr. Howson, who was much encouraged by the personal interest taken by Benson; and he, on the other hand, was glad to have some part in the governance of a school in which the curriculum was predominantly conducted on the "modern" lines which he believed most valuable for the ordinary English boy of the present day. With these distractions and occupations Benson remained fully engaged until the sudden subversion of all society in August 1914.

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I do not think that Benson was more hardly hit by the War than other men of his age. Like all men of feeling, he grieved at the crash of the civilisation so painfully built up by men of culture like his own, and he lamented the constant loss of those whom he had known as boys at Eton and undergraduates at Cambridge. But I did not observe in him any fits of deep depression during the bad days in the autumn of 1914, and I do not think that the nervous breakdown which began a couple of years later was brought on by war anxieties and griefs. He saw that there was work for those to whom age denied the possibility of an active part, and that the few old and middle-aged Dons left in Cambridge had the duty of keeping the place in working order until peace should bring youth back to it again. And the War had been in progress a little over a year when the last great change of his life came about.

In November 1915 Donaldson—he had never been a strong man, and his vitality had been impaired by the strenuous work of a year's Vice-Chancellorship—had a seizure at the Altar of the College Chapel, and died within a week. The Visitor of the College, the seventh Lord Braybrooke, hardly hesitated, knowing that he had the right man for the position on the spot; he offered him the Mastership, which Benson accepted at once, to the great joy of every member of the College alive. He was formally admitted Master on December 9, 1915. In the then depleted condition of Cambridge,

the new position made no very great change in his duties: he presided at meetings of the Governing Body with efficiency, making himself master of the business in hand, in difficult times, to the advantage of the College, and with ever ready consideration for his colleagues. A new interest soon arose in the various courses for officer cadets which began to be held in Cambridge. Batch after batch of these was quartered in Magdalene, and he was interested to endeavour to give to them the feeling of some corporate College life, so that in the midst of their military studies they might gain the impression of having had an academic experience: those who have survived will always be grateful for what he was able to do for them in those days of hard work and anxiety, and his presence in Hall and Chapel was appreciated, as well as the more intimate terms on which some of them were received. At the end of each course there was a farewell last dinner in Hall, at which it was always clear that the cadets were really grateful to the College for what had been done for them, and most of all to the Master for his personal contact and provision of such attention and comfort as was possible.

In 1917, just ten years after the former attack, he suffered a second nervous breakdown, unfortunately of longer continuance than the last; it began in the same way, with insomnia, which passed into an abiding melancholy and depression. Again

it is difficult to assign a reason; he had been much grieved first by the death of his brother Hugh in 1914, and then by that of his sister Margaret; in writing a memoir of her, he had thought much over the periods of mental trouble from which she had suffered at intervals for some years, and it is possible that a kind of infection communicated itself to him as he brooded over his sister's unhappiness. It is not my intention to describe in any detail this wretched period in his life, which was indeed intellectually almost a blank; he withdrew from Cambridge, and seemed best at a rest home near Epsom; he was troubled by imaginary difficulties—he thought at one time, quite mistakenly, that he was in financial straits—and there seemed no improvement in his general feeling of weakness and discouragement. Even when the War was over, he was not able to return to College life, and he more than once announced his intention of resigning the Mastership; but the Visitor and the Fellows always firmly refused to receive his resignation. At last—but hardly until 1922—under the constant care and attention of his friend and doctor, Mr. Ross-Todd, he began to get better; the end of the trouble did not on this occasion, as formerly, come suddenly, but he gradually returned to health; and early in 1923 he was completely his old self once more, and back in full health and spirits at the Old Lodge.

He took up College and University work with

all his old enthusiasm and more: so much so, indeed, that his friends began to be almost alarmed at the amount of new obligations which he accepted. He had always been a most generous benefactor, in material ways, to the College; and now his generosity reached its summit. There was never a term in which he did not announce some new gift adding to the grace or comfort of the College: some structural alteration, the panelling of a room or passage, the provision of a new and beautiful reading-room for the undergraduates, a new organ for the Chapel, an entry into the Hall for the Fellows to the dais behind the High Table. He also lent the College large sums of money, bearing low interest and to become its property at his death, with which it was enabled to provide further accommodation, sorely needed in the great post-War rush to the Universities, for students; the numbers had gone up more than fifty per cent, and could be further extended if there were more room. I do not think I shall be guilty of an indiscretion if I indicate the source of some of these funds. Benson was making a large and steady income from his writings; but very considerable sums were also provided by a lady with whom he had kept up a regular correspondence for some years. They never met: she was a foreigner, living abroad; she had admired his books and the general outlook on life set forth in them, and she placed at his absolute disposal comparatively large funds to be used for any purpose,

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public or private, at his discretion. Besides the expenditure on material indicated above, he devoted a good deal of this to the most useful task of helping poor undergraduates, who would otherwise have found it difficult or impossible to obtain an education at the University; he made unofficial scholarships or "bursaries" for boys, not necessarily of first-rate intellectual ability, but likely to do credit to themselves and the place of their education if they could stay in Cambridge long enough to take a degree.

In the same way he resumed his work with the Fishmongers' Company: and here I am fortunate in being able to insert a note on his connexion with the company by his old friend, Mr. Owen Hugh Smith.

"Arthur Benson was elected to the Court of the Fishmongers' Company in 1911. He liked being on the Court and was nearly always present at the Courts and Committees up to the time of his first illness, and again after his recovery. This illness delayed his becoming a Warden until 1924, when he became Renter Warden, which office he held until his death. He would have become Prime Warden in June 1926, and was looking forward keenly to holding the office.

"In every way he enjoyed his connexion with the Fishmongers' Company; he liked the traditions that surround a City Company which has existed for six centuries, and was proud of the Hall with its pictures and plate that have been bestowed by former

members of the Company during the last four centuries. He was on the friendliest terms with the other members of the Court, and made it clear that he liked them and knew they liked him. They did indeed like him, for he always seemed deeply interested in whatever his neighbour was telling him.

“He took great pleasure in the hospitality of the Fishmongers’ Company. As Renter Warden he was responsible for all the details connected with entertainments, and was careful to see that everything was carried out finely and with dignity. He felt that it was important that the entertainments of the City Companies should be maintained on the same generous lines as in the past and with the same customs. He used to say that much of the Company’s income had been bestowed on it originally for the purposes of hospitality, and that it would not be right for the Company to give all its income away in charity. He enjoyed being present at the Company’s entertainments. Possibly his long absence made him appreciate the social side of life even more than before; anyway on these occasions he radiated geniality and contributed much more than his share to the pleasure of the evening.

“We looked forward to the time when he would have become Prime Warden, as he would have been an efficient Chairman of the Court and Committees, and would have presided over the Company’s dinners genially and with dignity. He was also a good after-dinner speaker, for he took a great deal of trouble to

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prepare his speeches and spoke with confidence and enjoyment. I remarked this particularly at a dinner last May when the Company entertained guests distinguished in journalism. As a rule the Prime Warden proposes all the toasts, but this time Arthur Benson was asked to propose the health of the guests, and he made an excellent speech. He had a habit of looking a good deal at his notes when speaking, and I noticed that whenever he was coming to a joke of which he thought well, he began to smile before he brought it out, and then smiled again more broadly afterwards.

“A great part of the Renter Warden’s work is to look after the poor members of the Company, visit the pensioners,<sup>1</sup> and control generally the domestic organisation of the Company. It is possible for a Renter Warden to be too easy-going, or to be too suspicious, but Arthur Benson had sympathy as well as judgement, and the Court generally felt, after he had presented a case, that it was wise to agree with what he recommended.

“Arthur Benson took a great interest in Gresham School, Holt. He was elected a member of the Board of Governors, as a Co-optative Governor in 1906, and served as such till 1924, when he was elected a representative Governor of the Fishmongers’ Company. He became Deputy Chairman in 1915, and served in this capacity until 1918, when he resigned owing to his illness. His great experience of education made him a most efficient Governor.”

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, pp. 160 *sqq.*

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I may mention that he now began to write again with his former ease and success. Towards the end of his "bad years" he had made some verse translations from the *Greek Anthology*, to which he now made additions, and published the result, a charming volume of free renderings, as *The Reed of Pan*: he made experiments in the way of novels (a form in which he had only very occasionally practised in former days), he wrote another appreciation of his father's life and work (*The Trefoil*), and continued his most successful *genre*, in my opinion, in *Memories and Friends*, short biographies in the style of *The Leaves of the Tree*.

So I must leave him; happy and full of honours, preparing, as it seemed, for more important tasks in the immediate future, the Prime Wardenship of the Fishmongers' Company, and a little later the Vice-Chancellorship of the University. We had all hoped for him another twelve or fifteen years of active life before he took a well-earned retirement, when the sudden end came.

It remains to give a brief account of the last and fatal illness. Except for a couple of days in the course of it, I was in London, and I owe the details to my friend and colleague Mr. Ramsey, President and Tutor of the College.

On Thursday, June 5, 1925, Benson had been in London; very early the next morning he awoke with a pain in the chest: he sent for the doctor later, who pronounced it an attack of pleurisy,

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though Benson thought it was only a form of rheumatism, and that he would be well enough to fulfil his week-end engagements. But he did not improve: on the Saturday he got up at tea-time, but felt so weak that he decided not to come into College on the Sunday, and wrote to cancel his attendance at one or two engagements during the next few days; he resigned himself to a week in bed, though the doctor told him that it should be a fortnight.

The serious turn for the worse took place on the afternoon of Wednesday, June 10. He had risen and walked to his study chair, to sit there while his bed was made, when he was seized by a violent heart attack which lasted for several hours, experiencing so great a difficulty in breathing that he seemed in real danger. The doctor was much alarmed, and invited a second opinion and installed a nurse. The acute stage passed off; but they did not dare to attempt to move him for some time, and he remained in the chair until the Friday morning, when, with the help of a wheeled chair and an ambulance, they got him back to bed.

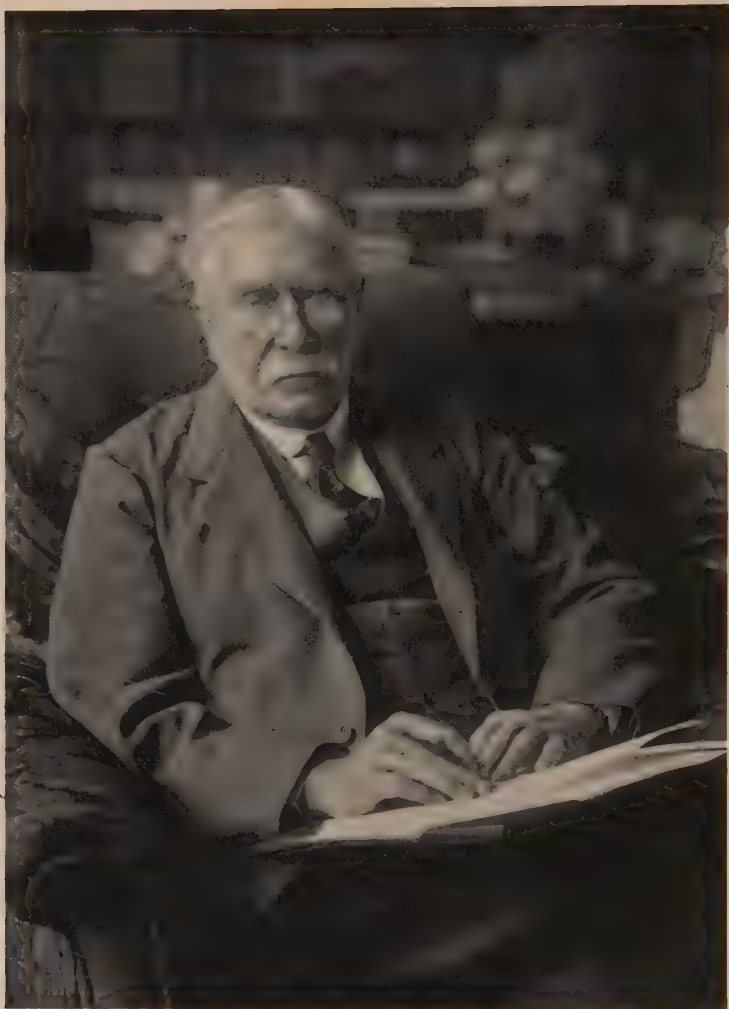
He had meanwhile had his last talk on College business—so typical of him and his devotion to the College that I cannot refrain from setting it down here. On the Thursday morning his servant, Hunting, told the Tutor that the Master would like to see him, and I will quote the Tutor's account of this last interview:

"I found him sitting in the chair, where he had been all night, looking very much altered, very weak and exhausted. He had been opening and reading a pile of letters, among which were two requests for testimonials from old members of the College. He was only able to speak in a whisper, and the attempt to do so brought back the hurried breathing and was obviously bad for him. But he explained in a word or two that he wanted to send something in reply to these letters, and he was much relieved when I said that I would get the testimonials drafted and typed and send them in for him to sign; and I promised then to send them off for him at once with covering letters. I came away as soon as I had found out what he wanted, as it was clearly bad for him to try to talk: his parting words as I left the room were, 'We mustn't let people down!' That was the last time I saw him."

Perhaps those last words give in a single sentence the whole history of his College life and the reason of his friends' and pupils' devotion to him—however ill and struggling against whatever pains and weaknesses, that was his leading thought, *we mustn't let people down*.

Things became rapidly worse. On the Saturday pneumonia had developed and he was becoming depressed and apprehensive: he feared that if he recovered he would not have strength to face the future or take up his work again. At least he was spared a third period of mental depression: on the





A. C. BENSON.

(ætat 60.)

*Cambridge Studios.*

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Monday he was wandering in mind, and late in the evening of Tuesday, June 16, a message was sent round that he was sinking. Most of the Fellows came into College, impelled by the wish to be near him, and sat sadly together; and about twenty minutes after midnight they learned that he was no more.

I shall grievously miss that tall, broad figure on the visits to Cambridge which a non-resident Fellow makes as frequently as possible: tall and broad, of late years stout as well: fair hair that had turned to grey, a large Viking moustache not so grey as the hair; generally at Cambridge dressed in a loose and rather shapeless grey flannel suit, with undressed leather shoes: in the evening the light coat was exchanged for a black one, usually double-breasted. (We had agreed many years ago that the right habit for a Don was to be *well* dressed in the style-before-last, but we perhaps differed in our methods of carrying out the principle.) I suppose I shall remember him best either presiding in Hall or in an armchair in the Combination Room: in Chapel stooping a little, with full surplice and red hood drooping over the shoulders, for he always followed the service in a book, handsomely bound in scarlet morocco, which was too heavy to lift from the desk: but most of all perhaps in his study, looking up from his armchair as one entered by the garden door; spectacles far down on his nose; on his lap, or on a board resting across

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the arms of the chair, a ruled note-book with perforated inner margin, on which he was writing steadily and clearly with a stylograph; the sheets were torn out as they were completed, dropped into a basket, and sent away to be typed: I do not think he ever revised them until this later stage.

In matters of opinion, I imagine he would have claimed a faint liberalism, perhaps emphasised in argument with myself, a somewhat rigid high tory in Church, Academy, and State. In educational affairs he professed to believe in what is called a "modern" curriculum, though he had small French and less German, and though his own culture was derived, it seemed to me, wholly from his classical studies; and while he would desire to be found on the side of the "progressives" in University affairs, he was capable of an independent view on most internal matters, and sometimes spoke very bitterly of the projects of reformers. So in Church matters, a very moderate High Churchman of his father's type, he had no love for prayer-book reform: he would have people, especially young people, "think for themselves," though he had an honest dislike of dissent, Protestant or Roman: his might be described, in the words he applied to Provost Hornby of Eton, as a "godly, righteous, and sober" piety.

*Homo dives in virtute, pulchritudinis studium habens, pacificans in domo sua:* I know he would have liked

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this verse from his favourite Vulgate, and from the Lesson which he always enjoyed when it was read in Chapel at the annual Commemoration of Benefactors. As he adorned his College during his life, and helped it to fulfil the great purposes for which it was founded, so he has generously endowed it after his death to carry on his projects. He will always be one of our great Masters.



V

A LATER FRIENDSHIP

By GEOFFREY MADAN



## V

### A LATER FRIENDSHIP

I WELL remember the first beginnings of my friendship with Arthur Benson. It was at Eton in 1913, and a Greek composition of mine, "sent up for play", had just been printed. Mrs. Cornish, that splendid creator of occasions, had said, from the top of a staircase, "Arthur Benson must see it", and so it had to be; there was no appeal. She wrote a letter herself, then and there; and my faltering lines followed. The response was highly characteristic: it came by return of post, and it was twice as long as both the original letters put together. It contained an invitation to Cambridge: "I think we should find something to talk about". And it was characteristic, too, that it liberally gave the means of retiring from the field, if I had not cared to follow up the chance. But actually, of course, there was nothing I wanted more, and it happened that I fell in easily with another of his friendly demands. He was constitutionally unable to leave a letter unanswered, and so was I. Of the next twelve years I still have at

least five hundred of his letters, and he must have written half that number more. And my brass was anyhow equal in quantity to his gold.

It was indeed, in the old phrase, gold for brass. By the kindness of his brother many of my letters lately came back to me. It struck me with a new astonishment, the extraordinary radiation of A. C. B.'s character; that warm sunlight which played so generously upon the chill, the misty, the almost extinct satellites. It never ceased to play upon them, and to irradiate them, if only they would play the game by his own somewhat intricate rules. If they didn't care to, it was, after all, only another form of the game, to be complained of to others for the lapses, and it was easy to take in good part. He himself wrote, as he did so many simple everyday offices, at high speed. He would eat, for instance, with the same rapidity: his plate was quite empty before the slightest depletion appeared in one's own; and a typical recollection of Rye or Magdalene would be to appear oneself changed for dinner as the clock was striking eight; the Master would rise from his chair, breathing hard, and pass to his room; he would change his clothes and reappear—the myth was almost literally true—before the slow clock had finished its chime. I always thought that in this incredible speed, in this failure to draw from the recuperative sources of life, the leisurely shaving and dressing and meditation of ordinary routine, lay the seeds of Nature's slow revenge on those who

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are impatient of her old rhythms of energy and rest. It certainly took its toll of sleep. For A. C. B. was the lightest of sleepers, and the most fitful: it was as if the full circle of the hours was not enough to hold the vitality and sympathy and humour with which he would warm and illumine them.

It was all that, no doubt, but not more. It would be out of focus, for instance, to fix in memory upon the "liberal and the loving heart"—a forgivable phrase to trace upon the sands of verse, but not to grave on the marble of prose. For A. C. B. did not give without taking thought, and he liked value for what he gave; he enjoyed striking a bargain, and changing his investments, and turning the labels on a despatch-box, as Mr. Gladstone was said to do. He was sparing of pity or sympathy, and he did not suffer fools gladly. He admitted few to friendship, and very few to intimacy; and his hands were never raised in deeper horror than when speaking of men and women who would be the last to think they could be raised in anything but benediction.

He was, moreover, deeply wedded to his ways, and increasingly so as time went on; nothing was allowed to interfere with the intricate code of his arrangements. I used sometimes to protest against this, and it was only shortly before the end that he gave me the secret—I had never suspected it—in one of his letters. "It is almost inevitable to a person of my temperament, that every guest means an expenditure of vitality, and the better I know any

one and the more that I desire to please them, the greater that expenditure is. So that . . . to entertain even my dearest and most congenial friend is apt to be a strain."

This was easy to overlook; and it is now perhaps the point to gather up the memories of a visit, or even of a single conversation, at Rye or Tremans or Cambridge. Two things were characteristic. First, that the general impression left on a guest was always how amusing, how full of point and charm, how well-informed without a touch of heaviness *he himself* had been,—so exquisite was the skill of the host: so delicate the practised, invisible touch which had guided the talk throughout. Then again, if he were to embark upon a story—and he had infinite stories of the finest vintage and condition—it was a safe thing to prepare for intoxicating laughter from the very first, for no disappointment was ever known. It was his method to use the short ordinary word, and to imprison the subtlest essences in it. In these descriptions, the very voice and form of A. C. B. rise up: the unintelligent congregation "herded like cattle in a pen, and crying out suddenly all together, like ducks in a pool"; the old Oxford don, "all eye and moustache"; the dreadful colloquialisms engraved, in the lines of handwriting, on gifts of plate, and summarised in the imaginary presentation from "Weedy to Tubby"; the decanter of claret in an hotel, which, as the inky liquid ebbed, revealed black objects taken at first to be

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dregs or lees of wine, but afterwards discerned to be "insects clasped in some horrible embrace"; the satyrs, "merry, silly, nasty creatures"—these continual images were the spice and the fine herbs of his conversation, and who could mix them in so rich a dish? The old cistern, in the warm upper room of a manor,—who else would have heard its soft, irregular drops as a "drowsy hiccough"? So readily indeed could these phrases be summoned up that they would even respond to a challenge. It was believed, for instance, for many years that the exact quality of voice possessed by one of his dearest friends would always elude capture in the coarse meshes of words. One day I put it to him deliberately. He glanced up, and answered without a pause: "A.'s voice, well, it was like a dry wind; a dry, luscious voice, husky with nurture". There was no need to pursue it further.

It was his habit, and it gave him great delight, to dream very rich and elaborate and fantastic dreams; this was a family characteristic. Sometimes they would be processions and high ceremonies, diversified by the intervention of old Eton friends, who would whisper dark words *more suo* during some strange liturgy; sometimes the distant past would rush upon him and old ecclesiastics, summoned up from the mists of Addington, became involved with him in situations of infinite absurdity; sometimes it would be oneself with whom the drama was played, till its recital at breakfast made one helpless with laughter.

ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON

Less often the dream would be epigrammatic in form; "the riddle of life is solved by gliding, and not sliding", was one of these. Or again, a fragment of verse might globe itself in his mind as he slept; he kept pencil and paper by his bedside, and he would dash it down, half asleep, and perhaps have forgotten it before he rose in the morning, so that he came upon the sibylline leaf with a fresh surprise. One I remember, which seems to me to possess an odd quality of its own; I still have the ruled page from his bedside writing-block, on which it was scribbled, frosty with its descent from the sky.

A bold and cheerful company of Ogres, Ghosts, and Ghouls  
Attacked and smashed to little bits the City of Tomfools:  
The Tomfools sailed to Araby, and raised another state;  
I can't say how *refined* they were, and how *considerate*.  
And now in High Tomfoolery they're very fond of telling  
What an almighty hash the Ghosts made of their former dwelling;  
They chaunt their great deliverance: they teach and preach and say  
How good it was of God to take their former pride away.

And sometimes lines of strange beauty came to him in sleep. It is well known that the "Phoenix" was a dream-poem; and I have preserved in one of his letters the concluding stanza which he wrote in waking hours to round it off, but omitted later on the advice of a friend who felt it to be "incongruous"; this pleased him very much indeed. Once he handed me at breakfast a Latin couplet of curious and haunting sadness, which had come to him by the same remote paths:

## A LATER FRIENDSHIP

Non horae rediere leves, nec sobrius ardor,  
Sed timor, et mea nox, et mala signa poli.

Many such colours and shadows were reflected from the quick prism of a mind asleep, but these few examples must suffice.

There were other talents, too, which made it an adventure to be with him. He had a good though not a profound knowledge of music; and one of the recollections of Magdalene must always be the silver chords which rose from the organ in a corner between study and bedroom. And I have a little sheaf of pen and pencil drawings, characteristically done at high speed; sometimes of old men seen for a moment in a club or at a meeting; more often of country views in Cambridgeshire or the Lakes; most of all, perhaps, of small architectural fragments that took his fine eye: a cottage wall of weathered brick, an irregular lichened roof, an old byre. He seemed to set no great store by this art, and he rarely kept his own drawings; it fell to others to save them, if they were to be saved. It was the same with his free and exquisite handwriting: "I think I *could* write well, if I had enough time," he would say. But he would admit under pressure, "perhaps my *capitals* are rather good".

All these gifts were unqualified delight, and they were seasoned by what was perhaps A. C. B.'s chief and most lovable art—his conversation. In this I have never known his equal at all; I have said above that its last triumph was the impression left of one's

own success and brilliance. It was an effort to him, as we have seen, and it was a trained faculty, but there was never anything less of a performance. It was the overflowing of a vivid, sensitive mind and—I use the word deliberately—a perfect sense of humour. This absolutely true perception was a thing that would never be suspected by those who knew him only as a writer; indeed, it seemed well designed to fasten on much that he wrote himself. But in its divinest sense it is the first and last memory of A. C. B.; and there must be many who know they will never see its equal, and who will call to mind, as they begin to realise their loss, the old words,

*ἦν τι καλὸν ποθόρησθα, μόνον λέγε, τῆνός ἄπεστι.*

VI  
THE AUTHOR OF HIS BOOKS  
By PERCY LUBBOCK



## VI

### THE AUTHOR OF HIS BOOKS

I THINK of the familiar sight of him as one entered his dark little study at Magdalene on the stroke of dinner-time, ready to proceed with him to Hall. He was never ready himself, the clock had surprised him. He was sitting in his arm-chair, writing the last words of his chapter as fast as the pencil could dash across the page; and then he was bundling together a sheaf, a small volume of sheets of manuscript; and with the other hand he reached out to the table at his side, plucked a large envelope already addressed to his typist, crammed his papers into it, and flung the packet into the post-tray; and so that was finished, and he was instantly alert for company and talk. How much had he written since he sat down in his arm-chair after tea? He was partly ashamed to confess his fluency, but he was entirely amused; he was defiantly droll about it, enjoying the wonder it provoked in his painful-handed guest. This one, since leaving him a couple of hours ago, had muddled and scratched away at a

few sentences; while he in his study, sitting comfortably by the shrubbery-screened window, had produced as many pages as the headlong pencil could cover in the time. What were they about? "Oh, the usual twaddle—you know my style!"—and he would heap up a derisive account, extravagantly picturesque, of his books as they were viewed, or supposed to be viewed, by his icily fastidious friend. They were mocked and travestied with rich enjoyment, exploding into irresistible laughter.

His facility was amazing. It swept his many other gifts into itself—his sharp-sighted imagination, his fine taste in words and phrases, his avid delight in beauty, his quick intellectual curiosity. It overwhelmed them, it diluted them; he had far more good wine than most people, but in the never-failing flow of his facility it turned pale as fast as it was poured. It was unfortunate, but it had to be admitted that there was no help for it. No one could watch him as he settled to his writing after tea, no one could observe the glee with which he banished his guest and sank contented upon his manuscript, without confessing that he wrote in the only manner possible to such a hand. It was easy for others to upbraid, to bid him linger, concentrate, vex himself with cares and scruples in his writing; to most of us there is trouble enough at the best, in the writing of a book, to make it seem no outrage to take yet a little more. But would the rectitude of the sternest hold out against the perfect painless

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ease which this writer could enjoy whenever he sat down to write? The mere act of authorship was a delight and a treat to which he looked forward throughout the day; as he went about his other business he fondled the thought of what was waiting for him presently; and with jealous care he guarded the sacred hours from interruption. To spoil the happy time, to cloud it with deliberate hesitation and thought, was more than could be expected of a man. His writing was not his work, it was his reward when work was over.

Indeed he never really wrote at all; he extemporised, he talked his books out on paper. His daily chapter was a conversation with himself, springing out of the mood of the moment; and to return upon the chapter of yesterday for any strengthening of its thought or its phrasing seemed as vain as to try to revise a past experience. He would offer an unpublished book to a friend for criticism, and the friend would suggest the reconsideration of this, the recasting of that, and he would heartily agree that it was excellent advice; but he could do nothing about it, for the pages in question had happened last week or last month, and it was impossible that they should now happen again with a difference. On the other hand nothing was easier than to throw the whole thing aside and to write a new chapter, many new chapters, a new book; and in a month or so a new book had happened and the old was forgotten upon the shelf. The tale of his

printed books seemed breathless enough, but in many of his years at Cambridge it might have been taken at twice the pace if he had published all he wrote; and this although his work—not his writing, but his work—filled much the greater part of every day. Even in earlier years, at Eton, where he could only snatch an hour or two for writing now and then, his manuscripts were piled high by the end of the half; and in times of freedom he had to practise a careful discipline, he had to force himself to use the joy of self-expression as temperately as he might. He paid dearly, and he was aware of it, for his valuable and dangerous gift, his fluency. In the freedom of improvisation he could not often do justice to the rest and best of his power.

But it is not his books that are here to be considered, it is his own view of his books, his attitude towards them, his way with them; and in looking back over thirty years and more one may get a full sight of the part they played in his life. Thirty years ago, at Eton, we knew him to be a “minor poet”; and this was his literary position, it is odd now to reflect, until he was well into middle age. Up to his fortieth year, or thereabouts, he wrote far more poetry than prose. Many of his poems, perhaps most of them, never saw the light, and his four or five volumes of verse give a very incomplete idea of his diligence in rhyming. He dropped it all with his usual promptness when he took to prose. He had thoroughly worked his poetic vein, once for all, and

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he had reached the end of it. Of the poems that he could write he had written very nearly all; in later years it was rarely that he still found a stray lyric running in his head. He thought lightly of his poetic past, when he thought of it at all; it had merely trained him for prose, it had helped him to the free use of a good vocabulary, it had given him a flexible phrase. Moreover a few of his poems had found their way into anthologies, and he was content. His best-known piece, strangely enough, is one that he did not consciously write—"The Phoenix", by which he is represented in the *Oxford Book of Verse*. It was composed in one of the fantastic dreams that perpetually excited his nights.

In these dreams, in these alone, the force of an impetuous imagination carried him away. It would be easy to find a score of reasons, within and without, why he never was carried away and never lost himself in waking life; they were in his temperament, they were in his environment—they were plentiful in both. For these pages the fact is enough: he began and continued and ended under the restraint of something shy, prudent, mistrustful—something which he clearly perceived and greatly disliked, but which held him. He was under no illusion about it, though in health and strength it did not trouble him; his insatiable inquisitiveness about small things, the least detail of the immediate foreground, gave him entertainment that never failed. He *saw* as greedily as though he were clutching and devour-

ing; he seemed to swallow what was before him into his vision, swiftly and silently, like a man too hungry to lose a moment. "What is your idea of the best way of spending eternity?" he would ask; but nobody's idea was as prompt as his own. He knew what he wanted, to see everything—though not so much the big and startling sights as the swarming trifles of which so many must needs be overlooked in life. In eternity he would hover, an insect with protruding unwinking eyes, an inch or so above the surface of things—giving a thousand years, say, to the face of a cliff, exploring every cranny, considering every blade of herbage: a satisfying meal at last. The visual part of his imagination was extraordinarily keen. The "mental eye" was no figure of speech for him; he looked at the images of memory and saw them in colour, light, form, without the least effort of evocation. This was enough for him; he desired experience, but without contact—to be close to things without quite touching them. Such was the condition upon which he let his fancy roam.

Using words so easily, picturing things so easily in his mind, he could represent what he saw, he could describe, without the slightest check to the racing pencil. It was as though he had only to release the phrases, and the thing was there, lucid and bright-coloured and fresh, as lively as life. In words on paper or in words aloud, it was all one; for in old days, when we knew him vaguely as a poet,

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we knew him much better as a story-teller. His serial story, told in instalments to his younger pupils on Sunday evenings, was always adventurous and dramatic; it proceeded steadily from episode to episode and punctually reached its climax on the last Sunday of the half. It cost him no effort at all, for as soon as he began to speak the scene opened and unrolled before him, and he followed it without hesitation. There, if we had known, we watched him using his talent in the manner appropriate to it. The spoken word was its natural medium; it did not demand the written page, it could not take full advantage of it. Clear and copious and pictorial speech, it was the mark of the born schoolmaster; and in after years this power returned to its own again in lectures at Cambridge and elsewhere—in which he often preferred, for ease and convenience, to leave his manuscript unopened and to allow his subject to flow freely into the words that were ready for it. One might certainly feel at such times that more of himself, more of his life, his temper, his humour, passed into expression than it usually succeeded in so doing when he wrote. He was entirely in his talk, and it was seldom with the whole of himself that he would write.

Indeed the more popular of his books were all composed, it might really seem, by somebody who slipped into the place of the man we knew when he subsided so happily after tea to his evening chapter. He could never understand the complaint of his

friends that they found another man, not him, in these easy-going mellifluous pages, with their rather faint and solemn discourse—another man, most unlike the masterful, combative, richly humoured man we knew. He maintained with perversity and spirit that the man in his books, the unworldly dreamer, the mild and placid recluse, was truly himself; while the other character, that of the man who thoroughly enjoyed the business and bustle of the world, was a part less natural to him, mainly assumed for self-protection. It was anyhow a curious duality, and though he was quite sincere in the things he wrote, at the moment of writing, it was assuredly true that he had the habit of excluding from his books three-quarters of his real attachment to life. He did so with no conscious intention; these interests simply fell away from him, it appeared, when he began to talk on paper. And if it was his true self which then emerged, he was not always over-pleased to find it accepted for his true self by the countless admirers who only knew his books. They beset him with claims upon his sympathy, claims which in kindness and courtesy he never denied; but he was embarrassed at times, and well he might be, by the thought of the large misunderstanding on which many of these affinities were based. And then again he would turn upon the friends who complained, who would not be satisfied with the phantom that usurped his place—or rather turn, and more readily, upon the unlucky books themselves, annihilating them with the ridi-

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culc which he put into the mouths of his critics. Nobody could punish his books with the slash of gay contempt and wit which their author could lay upon their backs.

He knew, whatever he might say, that though he was a writer first and foremost, he was not *all* a writer. His books engaged him very deeply; but they only engaged, they never had possession of him. He would take no lasting responsibility for them; they occurred, they passed, and when they had passed they could expect very little of his loyalty. He would look at the enormous line of them upon the shelf with amusement, with tolerance, with friendly affection, with gusts of irritation and dislike—with anything but the fidelity of one who had lived with them in real intimacy. Each of them was an affair of charming sentiment while it lasted; but it was soon over, so soon that it could leave no permanent mark upon his feelings. And still he hoped that the next affair of the sort would be something profounder and intenser; it vexed him to think that there were depths of communion between a writer and his book which he perpetually missed. Why should he be cut off from that experience? The answer was clear enough: he pursued the affair while it was diverting, and no further; he would not pay for it with any sacrifice. But even while he admitted the answer he was infinitely ingenious in persuading himself that it was not final. The question was never settled in his mind, and it often fretted him. Yet his power of

enjoyment did not fail him in this matter either, and if his levity began to distress him uncomfortably he could always laugh at it. Anyhow he had an entrancing time, brief as it was, in the making of a book; he returned to that, and no uneasy reflection could disturb it.

These were the books which won him his big mixed audience; and in spite of admirable pages here and there—wherever by some chance he allowed his real humour and vigour to appear for a moment—it must be said, no doubt, that they hardly carry weight enough for criticism. His biographical sketches and studies are another matter. With a concrete figure before him, a human being to be represented in the appearance of life, he had a task that held his attention more firmly than any musing meditation upon a sunset in a college garden. As a fact he never mused or meditated in any garden, at any hour; when he was moved to reflection in his books he drew from no experience of thought outside them. It is not surprising if the thought within, thus starved of life, wandered and tottered in uncertainty. But his mind was immediately brisked by the presence of a living model in the line of sight. Here he was in company, and sociable company was what he daily demanded and enjoyed; he became on the spot more like himself as we knew him. He cultivated the society of Carlyle, Ruskin, Rossetti, Pater, whoever it might be, with the zest which he brought to a party of friends at dinner. He watched them, he plied them

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with his questions, he courted them with talk and laughter; and he could not be denied, he insisted on an easy relation with each of them. And so when he wrote about them his page was nourished by the actuality which at other times it wanted. The change was obvious in a moment; he was now writing of matters that played a part in his life.

But then indeed there was this other trouble, that Carlyle and Rossetti and the rest were of the past, and that in life he had never known them. It was much more in his character to deal with people than to float on dreams, and so far it was a good step towards himself and his own solidity; but still these people had to be recalled from books and from hearsay, a business that asked for patience and application and all the pains that his quick fancy very easily evaded. And it also asked for considerably more. It required an imagination that could not only see from without but feel from within—that could pass through the looks of men and turn round and settle in their minds. This power was not his, nor could be, with the precautions and reserves that restricted his intimacy in life; it was not likely that one so well secured against invasion himself should be able to break through the inner defences of another. He looked on from outside, and he saw as much as could possibly be seen from his distance—only an inch or so perhaps, but never less; and when he wished to go further and to penetrate he was reduced on the whole to guesswork, to precarious speculation, very

handy and vivacious in itself, but not marked with authority. Of the motives at work in most human character there were some, not the least important, of which he had no knowledge at all; and his ingenuity was resourceful enough to disguise the lack, which he knew to be a lack, but not to supply it. There was nothing he loved better than to learn all that could be told him about a man or a woman; and if that were a way in which everything could be learnt he might have been a great master of biographic art. But he had not the clue that would take him between and beyond the things that could be told him.

It is not only the legendary dead, however, who deserve and are apt for portraiture. Close at hand and all about are well-marked faces, eloquent types, figures appealing or commanding, never perhaps to be known to fame unless somebody catches their likeness while there is still time; and this portrait-painter, with his happy gift of seizing an expression or an attitude to the life, was keenly aware of his opportunities. He worked at his best and blithest when he wrote about people whom he had literally seen and known, actually talked and dined with; there he faced a scene that nothing obscured, and he could bring the whole diversity of his talents to picture it. His first and fullest opportunity came when he wrote about his father; and if the memory of that singular man could survive in his own achievement, its personal vividness must have been



*Cambridge Studios.*

A. C. BENSON.

(In his study at the Old Lodge, Magdalene College.)



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lost without the son. He, in his active and crowded life, found many other chances of the kind, not less fortunate; he used them freely, and what he made of them is to be seen in several of his most attractive volumes. It is impossible to doubt that these will also prove to be his most enduring, for here at last he wrote as he lived, with the pressure of energy and observation and curiosity that never slackened when he was not writing. His poetry, criticism, fiction, moralisation, for all their pleasant ways, cannot well satisfy those who remember the man behind them; but they recognise him unmistakably in his sketches of many of his friends.

And perhaps, after all, his best writing was not in any of his books, but in his letters. I have recalled him as he was to be seen towards dinner-time, fresh from his daily treat, exuberant, invigorated by the unchecked torrent of his phrases; and this is how we naturally see him as the author of his books. But suppose the hour to be shifted, suppose it to be the end of the morning and time for lunch; and now he was in the same arm-chair, equally deep in written pages, equally unready, but in a very different mood. At this hour the struggle to keep pace with his huge correspondence was always to be found at its climax; and as the twentieth, thirtieth, fortieth letter of the morning was cast into the post-tray his exasperation was forcible and frank. But though he lamented he still wrote, and every morning there were a score or two of people, scattered round the globe, who

received a much longer and livelier letter from him than many of them, it may be, had fairly earned. Whatever might happen in the evening over his book, it was surely he himself who wrote these letters. The familiar world was with him in the morning, the world which he loved and trounced and enjoyed to the last, and when he was in that company there was nothing unreal or unsubstantial about our friend. His best books were never written, because he would not or could not write them before the world. Something not unlike them, let us hope, was lavished on the daily post, not irretrievably. But the best of all were never put on paper, and these must remain, inalienable, unforgettable, in the possession of those who knew him.

VII  
TRAINING AND TEMPERAMENT

By the Rev. Hon. EDWARD LYTTTELTON, D.D.



## VII

### TRAINING AND TEMPERAMENT

THE following slight fragmentary sketch of an old friend is not meant to be an enumeration of his merits, still less a record of his achievements; for in regard to the latter I was separated from him during the most fruitful portion of his career and about this aspect of his life there will be no difference of opinion. My object has been rather to discuss a certain limitation of his powers, his aspirations, and his view of life, and to show how it was a natural outcome of his early training and a sensitive temperament. This may explain and perhaps justify what might otherwise be taken as an over-critical estimate of a singularly lovable man.

My friendship with Arthur Benson began in 1884 when he came as Classical master to Eton. We lived together very happily for nearly five years when my marriage necessitated his sojourning under another roof. In 1890 I left Eton for Haileybury

and saw little of him for many years, but whenever we met we could resume intercourse just as if it never had been interrupted. We corresponded at intervals and, of course, I read some of his books, etc., and once or twice visited him in his own home at Addington or Lambeth. His little brother, Hugh, was my pupil for about two years from the time of his coming to Eton, I think in 1888. I mention these facts to explain how far my impressions of his character and work may be called first-hand. In 1890 he was certainly a very popular young master, but he surprised some of us by his subsequent development in personality and influence. I can lay no claim to any close acquaintance with the work of his prime either at school or as Head of a Cambridge College. In the following remarks therefore I only attempt to indicate the temperament with which he was born and the influences which gradually moulded his character, till he became the writer whom a very large public, sooner or later, learned to know.

Our domicile at Eton was the charming little old house called Baldwin's Shore, facing Windsor Castle, and our converse was at meals and sometimes in hours of recreation, either at football or riding, or more often trotting off with a few colleagues to a spot on the G.W.R. near Slough: where we used to watch the broad-gauge express, the "Flying Dutchman", whizzing by within three feet of us before its first stop at Swindon, at sixty-five miles an hour.

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Arthur's presence on these occasions, or indeed at any small social gathering, was a pretty good guarantee that "the thing would go well". He was sympathetic, critical, but never caustic, always humorous, and, though not learned, was full of literary and archaeological interest; his knowledge being well above the average standard reached by very hard-worked public-school masters.

He was also a first-rate story-teller, that is to say, he never lugged his anecdotes in, so to speak, by the scruff of the neck, and he knew instinctively what pace in getting over the ground would suit his audience.

Meantime he had a native gift for maintaining quiet discipline in his division, and for captivating the little boys by long yarns on Sunday evenings. He would sit in his study encompassed by these juveniles, spinning out a never-ending story all about nothing in particular; but curiously attractive and, in diction, perfectly adapted to the fourteen-year-old mind.

About this time, 1885, I learned that Arthur had developed a craving for writing, the end of which it was difficult to forecast. He showed me one day a huge pile of manuscript, the pages of which he had covered, I think, in his Cambridge days, not for publication but to give him facility in writing. There is no doubt the effort succeeded in achieving the object in view. The odd thing was that the screed did not seem to deal with any particular

subject. He seemed to be far more concerned with the fact of writing than with the message to the reader: and this idiosyncrasy betrayed itself not long after when he published anonymously his first book, *Arthur Hamilton*. It would not be fair to criticise an author's maiden utterance, and the only reason I mention it is that, somewhat to my astonishment, I found traces of fragments of conversations, trifling expressions, and casual anecdotes incorporated into the picture of his hero. The result was nebulous, of course, and loosely compacted, though the little volume made very pleasant reading: but it struck some of us as strange that he seemed to have no concern whatever with the question whether these incongruous interpolations marred the consistency of the portrait. A. H., if I remember right, was a young man of no particular tone of mind or with any definite aim in life, but markedly refined in manners and temperament. It so happened that while the book was in progress, a dictum of a ribald denizen of the West End clubs was reported to Arthur concerning the father of one of our pupils, described by the speaker as "a talking jackass". The expression, uttered *ore rotundo*, tickled Arthur's ears and he went straight off to put it into the mouth of his hero, young Hamilton, though it was impossible to conceive that the stripling could have said anything in the least like it.

Again, what a curious light is shed on his mind at that time by the following incident. A great

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stir was made in the 'eighties by Mrs. Ward's attack on Christianity in *Robert Elsmere*. A friend wrote suggesting that Arthur and I should collaborate in a rejoinder novel, emphasising the truth of revealed religion; he being entrusted with the plot and the artistic framework, I mainly with the psychological development of somebody or other from agnosticism to faith. I shudder to think what kind of farrago would have been the outcome of two raw ignoramuses patching together a mosaic of trivialities on the highest of all themes: but more by way of feeling his pulse than with any view to business I mentioned the idea to Arthur. He was quite keen and told me he had fifty pages of manuscript already written which would do capitally for a start. He put them then and there into my hands, and I glanced through them with some interest. They dealt with boys and masters in a pleasant chatty style, but the question of the plot and purpose of the novel was in no way elucidated. I mooted it the following day, who was to be hero, what sort of experience he was to go through, with what view of life should he start, etc., but Arthur evidently thought all such conundrums tiresome and wholly unnecessary. He looked upon artistic expression by means of written English words as an end in itself : as

Something attempted, something done,

without any deep concern as to what the smoothly running paragraphs were likely to express.

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Singularly enough the next line of Longfellow's poem,

Hath earned a night's repose,

suggests that Arthur's labours were less well rewarded in one respect than the Village Blacksmith's. He told me about 1886 that he sometimes had a nightmare and it was always the same. He imagined himself "sitting at a table and obliged to go on writing with nothing to say". There was something of an omen in the words, though neither of us saw it till long afterwards.

His writings at this time included a monograph on Archbishop Laud and a magazine article on Henry Bradshaw. I am not competent to judge of the value of the former beyond the fact that the little book avoids all survey of the historical background of its subject. The personality is all that interested the writer, and that, too, in a curiously external fashion; so that he showed how little concerned he was at that time with any deep problem such as the grave and ample question of the principles by which a human being orders or has ordered his going, or how far character depends on the nature of its most abiding desire. Nor did he seem to be conscious that his picture of two great men was in any way defective.

Meantime such criticisms as reached him were liable to give him acute pain. Not till much later did we realise that he was sensitive to an extraordinary degree. Certain virile-minded "Philistines"

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wrote savagely of the morbid tone of *Arthur Hamilton*, and Bradshaw's admirers took umbrage at the faint sketchy description of a very remarkable man, dashed off and published directly after his death and long before any adequate estimate of his immense services to scholarship had begun to be contemplated. Arthur could not bear to be told of such things. They galled him without instructing him: and such criticisms as reached his friends without his knowledge were kept from him, as we felt that the imparting of them would give pain to no purpose.<sup>1</sup> I have omitted a curious fact in Arthur's literary development. His early essays in

<sup>1</sup> No one, probably, cared to talk to him about the parodies which appeared in *Punch*. One of "From a College Window" contained the following excellent touch: "I often think how much the postman does for us and how little we do for the postman". Later on was a stately account of a meeting in the old St. James's Hall, got up for the protection of vegetables against the onslaughts of the Vegetarians. Several prominent men were described as speaking. "Mr. A. C. Benson then came forward to say that so cordial were his sympathies with this great movement that two out of the eleven books which he proposed to publish next autumn would be devoted to the subject: the title of one of them was to be "Musings of an Introspective Vegetable-marrow". Is it not tragic that this humorous man should be unable to enjoy harmless fun when it once touched the Ego?

A delightful episode occurred at Eton when Arthur, recently become prominent as an essayist, was dining with Edward Austen Leigh, the Lower Master. There was a temperament indescribably unlike Arthur's, yet most lovable: entirely unselfconscious, and unspeculative; strong with the Victorian common-sense outlook on life: perfectly content with the best sort of Protestant country-gentleman's dutifulness; a fine athlete and a scholar wholly unsusceptible of any Oxford influence. He had been reading Arthur's essays; and suddenly, in his high fluty voice and slow utterance, while carving an excellent leg of mutton,

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writing were full of loose and obscure English. This was pointed out to him, and accepting the criticism with complete good-humour he set himself with serious resolution to purge his style, and as far as I know he succeeded.

His most important and permanent piece of work, however, remains to be mentioned. The biography of his father the Archbishop recalled the youthful essay on Archbishop Laud, and betrayed the same pronounced interest in small, picturesque details of personal appearance and demeanour. It was, of course, inevitable that much of the solid work of the biography should be a record of great and momentous events in the life of the Church of England, and all of these are artistically handled and set out in due proportion. The work, it is said, was carefully supervised by Mrs. Benson, but the interest of it for us now is how far Arthur succeeded in being thoroughly objective. Large and very important issues were before him which had only an indirect bearing on his own life and none upon his own sensations and predilections with which most of his writings are concerned. It is greatly to his credit that this part of his undertaking was so faithfully carried through. It meant a great deal of labour and evinced a faculty for

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announced : "Benson, I have been reading some of your writings. I never before knew that you were such an unhappy man." What Arthur made of this I never heard. Coming from the kindest-hearted of all his many friends it could not have wounded him.

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handling history with fidelity without heaviness. Arthur both in conversation and in writing, whatever his theme, could never be dull or boring any more than he could be philosophical; but as far as I remember, the more impersonal his theme became, the less congenial he found it. However, the research entailed and the healthiness of his father's outlook on life worked beneficially, we thought, on Arthur's mind for a time, and we hoped rather against hope that he would be induced to write less and think more: to imbibe masculinity and hopefulness by reading records of several great men of action, some of whom were known to him: and to penetrate to the secret of some great writer's message.

This, however, was not to be. One must remember that without any effort whatever he could command the homage of unnumbered readers; and the encomiums which were poured upon him from the most unexpected quarters would have made it difficult for any author to shift his feet off the ladder of fame and tramp the dusty paths of research.

We may now perhaps conjecture the process of growth from Arthur's early manhood to his early middle age. I should mention that after 1890, being separated from him and reading but little of what he wrote, I have to go by certain impressions of his later years gathered at second-hand but confirmed by the perusal of his recent work, a charmingly written appreciation of many mutual Eton

friends. All his life through a certain want of robustness may be explained if we reflect on the influence of his home training on a temperament marked by two characteristics, extreme sensitiveness and a tendency to introspection, the latter being the outcome of his being reduced to gathering material for his writing from reflection on his own sensations. My knowledge of the home training is derived from one or two visits, his own account of it, and that given by his brother Fred.

Two facts have to be borne in mind. Arthur in his young days was happy and contented, and he remained so till some obscure physical malady brought on two successive and grievous periods of neurasthenia, from which he recovered for a few years before his death. But in his prime his spirits were never buoyant or boisterous, and his mind in youth was unable to supply the needed tonic of a strong impersonal interest in some fundamental principle of life, such as would have resulted in deep convictions and steadfast pursuit of some ideal; some vigorous endeavour for the bettering of the world around him. This defect was, I am sure, the outcome of the home atmosphere, in which the tendency was for the children, still in their teens, to discuss fundamental principles as if they were open questions. That is of course the surest way to deprive them of all interest and vitality. On some tempers it might have operated less injuriously than it did on Arthur. For we must add to the influence

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of random discussion of principles the effect of a certain want of sympathy between the father and the sons. Suppose a very sensitive nature in the boy, how would roughness affect him? Certainly it would cause estrangement. Thus the influence of the Archbishop's noble personality was in tragic fashion lost. The boy grew to associate deep strong religious conviction and a grand absorption of self in the world-wide society with the harsher, wounding element in his surroundings, and the one salutary element which would have strengthened him, a lasting reverence, an unquestioned loyalty to Divine Law, was never securely planted in his heart. It may be noted, I think, through all his writings that his thoughts were guided and dominated less by allegiance to the highest law than by that which always supplies a motive in the absence of law, personal affinities—the shrinking from pain, the yearning desire for a continuance of the tranquil happiness afforded by health, congenial work, and comradeship.

Thus when he resigned his mastership at Eton his friends were not quite confident that the extra time to be devoted to writing would be for his good. Some hoped that he would acquire deeper knowledge and learning and incorporate in his reflections on life something more of body and objective thought than could be found in his earlier efforts. But no one who knew him well could be confident in any such forecast. It was not that the routine work—admirably done—of an Eton master had

prevented him from acquiring knowledge, so much as the want of interest in questions of principle; the effect of which is to enfeeble the grip on fact, or at least—if the memory is strong—to prevent the mind from seeing facts in their true proportion. Arthur's memory was good enough; but the deep motives of human action, the interplay of the forces which stir the mass-movements of mankind, no less than the mighty drama of human souls in their period of probation, remained outside his horizon. So the facts which, to some minds, speak of these and great kindred matters presented themselves to him without colour or any rich significance. This I attribute to his want of firm conviction; and that want was probably due to the great omission in his childhood's training. He was not permitted in early years to grow in unquestioning reverence for the great laws from which some boys learn the awfulness of life and, along with that, the glory of the hope set before us. Hence his interest in general human experience was confined to the pictorial, the scenic, and the superficial.

At this point I must admit that after about 1900 I left off reading what he wrote, but I am aware that especially in his poems and literary criticisms he reached a high standard of excellence.

There is no doubt about the fine quality of his best lyrics. The late-written estimates of Eton people, however, show, if I am not mistaken, that he was still concerned with superficialities more than with

the deep things of character. It is worth noting, too, how often in that book he seems to show himself grateful in a wistful kind of way to those of his friends who were habitually gentle in their speech.

But, it will be asked, does this view of his writing explain his great popularity? I think it does. Arthur Benson's popularity is not only consistent with this estimate but largely dependent on it. Moreover, the estimate is corroborated by some encomiums on our friend written directly after his death. Among the many people who loved him, some have been at pains to do ample justice to the merits of his books, and I should be loth indeed to pose as a carping critic of a really artistic literary craftsman. But it is possible to admire the writing and at the same time to recognise that there is but little in it which it is important for mankind to learn. Some will disagree with this verdict and tell you that they have received comfort and help from his books. I heard of a minister in religion—I think in Wales—who charged his congregation with the utmost earnestness not to let a week go by without reading some portions of Benson's essays. But I have failed to find any one of these votaries who could say what was the nature of the help given; what they had learnt from his pages which they did not know before; whether, in short, his merits as an author are not summed up in this—that he wrote very charmingly and in a very kindly spirit, but had nothing particular to say. He did not confine himself to one note, but the main purport of his essays

was to the effect that as he himself when threatened with melancholy had combated it by employing his time in a particular way, so he hoped others might follow suit and achieve a similar success. It was the best he had to give and he gave it generously: but, of course, as he had never been given any solid foundation of hopefulness in childhood, he was reduced to finding material for his reflections by recording his own sensations, and the constant introspection which this involved accounts for the tone of wistfulness and *desiderium* which generally characterised his utterances.

Nor is there anything in the least surprising in the popularity which he gained. At the present day the reading public is immensely larger than it was fifty or even twenty years ago: but it is a public the majority of whom prefer writings which make little demand on the intellect and only a tempered demand on the conscience. Millions of people in England and America dislike having their moral fibre braced, and shrink from taking in new facts which require to be related and linked up with others already learnt. Perhaps that is because, in our educational efforts, we have failed to keep alive the love of knowledge for its own sake which every normal child exhibits incessantly or spontaneously before he goes to school, but which by seventeen years of age in the large majority of cases has almost ceased to exist. But most people like to feel as if they were learning; and Arthur's meditative, daintily written essays, confidential in

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their appeal, always sympathetic and kindly, with a constant flavour of literary culture, the result of wide though superficial reading, give them exactly what they want. His books are bought and read for the same reason as young people go to the cinema. It is commonly fancied that minds can be nourished without exertion. The nourishment may or may not be a delusion, but the want of exertion is an undeniable fact; and thousands of readers want no more.

Probably Benson's public would have been trebled if he had ever pandered to the popular taste for coarseness, cynicism, or vulgar excitement. But for these ingredients he had no taste, rather an innate abhorrence. His books are quite free from degrading elements, and, negatively, a good deal can be said in their praise. Any critics who go further must be, I think, of the number of those to whom the truest interpretation of life is a mild hedonism, as free from rubs, tumbles, and a "troubled spirit" as circumstances permit. On the other hand, any one to whom the true life means not a shunning of struggle and striving, not an otiose spectatorial view of mankind's gestures as they press forward in their pilgrimage, but a welcoming of pain as they make answer to the call of God, and the stern joy of the good soldier of Christ, will be quite certain to find something unsatisfying in these writings.

But Arthur's practice was a long way higher than his published creed. I have used the word "kindly" more than once in reference to his utterances. They

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could not be other; for Arthur was compact of kindness. He never said or did anything to wound the most sensitive temperament; he was generous in his gifts; and, more than that, he would take unstinted pains to afford help and advice when he was asked; and there must be very many friends and acquaintances who owed to him scores of delightful letters of ungrudging and unfailing counsel. It was, I believe, far more his misfortune than his fault that he never reached, except now and then in his poems, a higher point of vision. Kindness was the best thing in life for him; and he gave of his best to all whom he thought were in need.

## APPENDIX

## NOTE

*Arthur Benson was elected Renter Warden of the Fishmongers' Company in June 1924. One of the duties of the Renter Warden is to visit the Company's Pensioners, i.e. poor freemen and freewomen who have fallen on evil times, to afford them relief where necessary and to make any recommendations that he may deem desirable in regard to the amounts of their pensions. It is customary for the Renter Warden elect to accompany the outgoing Warden when the latter visits all the pensioners in May of each year. This practice enables the incoming Renter Warden to gain an insight into his work before taking office. In accordance with this practice, Benson visited all the pensioners in May 1924, and a short paper which he wrote recording his impressions of this visitation is printed here by permission of his literary executor, Mr. E. F. Benson, and the Court of the Fishmongers' Company.*

## “PENSIONERS”

By A. C. BENSON

IT fell to me not long ago to visit some pensioners of an institution to which I belong, not personally known to me, most of them; and the experience was so strange and opened so many doors in the imagination that I venture to put the impression down; “opened”, I said; but that was the mysterious part of it, that the door was opened for so brief a glimpse, and so instantly and impenetrably closed again that it quickened rather than satisfied the curious fancy.

It all happened in London, or rather it was the London pensioners that we visited, mostly old or elderly women, living where and as they would. But so wide was the scope of our investigations that at one time we were paying a call on the edge of Epping Forest, while our last visit was to a house some way south of Clapham Junction.

The first of many points that struck me was that though we skirmished half over London we saw so little of anything that could be called a slum. Of

course slums exist—if you enter London by train, from high embankments you look down sometimes into the crowded backyards of very ill-built and crowded tenements. But if my recent experience had been my only sight of London, I should have concluded that London consisted, the moment you emerged from the main thoroughfares, of endless streets of small trim houses of tasteless decorum, sometimes quite plain and austere, sometimes breaking out into bow-windows and stone facings, with strips of coloured tiles, very neat, but a perfect dream of pretentious ornament. These little houses are not so much ugly as deeply unpleasing: the wrong colours, the wrong shapes, the wrong materials, an instinct feeling after adornment, and gone utterly and hideously astray on perky and jaunty lines. Yet embedded among these serried and conventional ranks were glimpses of beauty: an old quiet almshouse, a tall Queen Anne house of mellow brick with solid casement lines; or best of all, big old mansions of bygone wealthy city-folk, once, no doubt, set among paddocks and shrubberies, but now withdrawn into a sort of affronted dignity behind high walls, with laburnums and red-flowering chestnuts looking sullenly over. Who now inhabits these great many-roomed places? I cannot divine.

As for all the visits we paid, I can but select three or four which stand out from the rest. Many of the pensioners were quiet, industrious, self-

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respecting women, who, no doubt, kept themselves to themselves, sincerely grateful for a solid little annuity, which gave them, at all events, freedom from the pressing anxieties of helpless age.

In one house—it seems to me to have looked out on a wide expanse of public park, with pools and gravelled play-spaces and a glimpse of high wooded hills behind—lay, in a rather crowded bed-sitting-room, on a sofa covered with rugs, an elderly lady of gracious manner and demeanour, reading a volume of Tennyson, and fully prepared to talk about the literary and artistic topics of the day. Her refinement was perhaps of the excessive order which necessitated the simplest names of common disorders being whispered, rather archly, behind a sheltering hand, while the fact that her married daughter, with whom she lived, had lately become a mother could only be communicated by nods and winks and infinite periphrasis. Watching her grandmother, as we talked, stood a bluff and sturdy girl, ardently desiring to be out in the world, and yet obviously admiring Granny’s unquestionable social distinction. Here there was, or had been, a mystery of some kind—for I have seen countesses of much less dignity and self-possession!

It was rather a relief, after this, to visit an old lady of ninety-six, permanently in bed, in a much poorer house, but with every evidence of a much livelier family life. The old dame had the face of an angel, so utterly kind and sweet-tempered and

selfless it had become; her porcelain complexion, her transparent blue-veined hands, showed a life long withdrawn from common use. She was in no pain, but she slept very little; she could not read; she could only richly remember and wait for the last change. But the old lady had an entirely merry and provocative temperament. She called us by imaginary names; she rallied her devoted daughter; she said in reply to a compliment from myself on the trimness of the room, "Ah, but there are a great many common things covered up—it amuses my daughter to do that," and she bade us farewell with a touch of roguishness, and an expressed determination to go on drawing her pension for many years yet—an entirely wholesome-minded, honest, well-beloved woman.

Then there was a visit to an old gardener, into whose quiet, smiling, tired look something of the peacefulness of the earth and the brightness of the flowers seemed to have passed. He was sitting in a small room, looking out on the back-gardens of houses, with so much large furniture about him that there seemed only narrow alleys and gangways among the chairs and tables. His kindly, well-dressed wife, much younger than himself, said that all that ailed him was that he could not get out enough into the open air, he was so crippled by rheumatism; he held an old flower catalogue in his hands—he had been living, no doubt, among well-stored recollections of flower and vegetable

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and fruit, and he turned from one speaker to another with a gentle amused smile.

Then, the raciest and most perplexing of all, was a fierce old woman with snow-white hair and humped shoulders, of eighty-eight, very small of stature and quick of movement, who had a bad word to say for every one and everything. Her room was most dainty and smart, a villa parlour, but when I admired it, she said, “It’s a perfect prison to me!” She wanted, it seemed, to go out long walks alone, and complained that there was always some one detailed to follow her; “Dogged and spied upon, I call it!” and adding, “In *my* younger days, we had work of our own to do!” When we asked if she saw anything of her numerous nephews and nieces, she said, “Believe me, nephews and nieces are no good to any one. They are not near enough to be kind, or far enough away to be polite. People now are brought up to think of nothing but themselves and their own pleasures—nephews and nieces indeed!” (with piercing emphasis). “They don’t trouble me much!”

She sat and looked at us with frank defiance and dislike; she hated being under an obligation to us, and said good-bye with relish. Downstairs we found the landlord of the house waiting, a ruddy man, with upstanding hair, staring eyes, and a permanently fallen mouth, a man who lived, it was evident, among domestic crises. He drew us into his parlour. “Can’t I be rid of this old—this old

woman?" he said, somewhat piteously. We pointed out that we had no hold over her. "Why not give her notice?" "I do, almost every day," he said, "but she won't go!" "What have you to complain of?" "Why, that she quarrels with every one; and then she keeps a fire and a paraffin lamp burning all night, all the year round, and the other lodgers object; and then she is always going off for walks, and we daren't let her go alone. She might have a stroke and be brought back helpless in a wheelbarrow." The prospect of the old lady being irremediably fixed in his lodgings was too much for the good man; he winked his eyes and swallowed a lump in his throat. We undertook to interview the senior nephew. He shook his head mournfully. "That's no use," he said. "He daren't go near her; she's got a tongue like nothing—like a knife, as you might say." He opened the door to let us out. There was the old lady herself in the passage, having disdainfully refused, on the score of health, to come down to the door with us. She was in a crouching posture near the keyhole, and a light of battle danced in her little black eyes. She made us a scornful bow, and we hurried off. There was deep pity in my heart for the staring landlord, and for the bad quarter of an hour he was going to have. But a tenant is very much of a fixture, in days when all have equal rights except owners of property.

Strangest of all, perhaps, was a weak-looking woman, with an overmastering cough, who lived at

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the very top of a high, dark, ill-smelling lodging-house somewhere in Southwark. We toiled up much-worn stairs, with greasy walls, and on each landing was a gruesome pile of lumber covered with frowsy rugs or cloths.

The top set consisted of a fair-sized room overlooking the street and a far vista of chimney-pots, with the grand serene white outlines of St. Paul's above all. There was a tiny bedroom for mother and daughter; a stifling kitchen; I suppose the son, unemployed, slept in the sitting-room. Yet here was a costly-looking inlaid table, and, wonder of wonders, a grand piano, how hauled up thither I cannot conceive, which the woman seemed to regard as a certificate of limitless respectability. No one, so far as we could make out, ever played it, and indeed its lid formed a ledge for an infinite variety of articles, from jugs to boots. Every window was closely shut, and the sickly scent of the dingy room was overpowering. Yet we had no complaints, no comments, and evidently the last thing in the good lady's mind was any thought of changing or bettering her conditions and surroundings; "a snug little place," she said, "and airy too, if it weren't for all those stairs—so bad for my cough!"

These were some of our special cases. But quite apart from the special problems and the thoughts that these visits evoked, I found myself again and again, as we threaded these miles of tame little streets with their neat hutches, wondering in myself,

with a surpassing wonder, what the vast ant-hill meant exactly, and what (if one admits any design or forethought in the making and ordering of the world at all—as I for one heartily do) they were all here for. They had ideas, thoughts, hopes, fears, fancies, most of these myriads of men and women, and were tethered pretty closely to their little bit of work, their little family circles. Was it for their sakes that they were all here, loving their lives well enough, I suppose, and content to live so—or at all events enjoying the world enough to be very much disturbed at the idea of quitting it? And what effect was this limited little bit of experience going to have upon them? What was ahead of them, when in one of the little bow-windowed bedrooms they lay in pain and stupor, with the familiar street sounds going on so heedlessly outside, and trying to glean some scrap of hope from the kind sad faces round them?

But one must not get caught in speculation like that; and the very sense of self-importance that the meanest and humblest life holds within itself is a proof, I think, of some bigger destiny.

But then to come closer to details. On what was the life of these old pensioners of ours built? Of what did it consist? Household duties, a shopping expedition, a little talk, a bit of reading or some needlework—a life of minute, self-contained routine. Some had evidently a wide range of affections—here was an album filled with snapshots of distant

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lands, dating from the War, the gift of a soldier son; some had son or daughter to keep house for; one had the visit of a kindly clergyman and the church services to look forward to; one was absorbed in the care of an elderly bullfinch, much flustered by the advent of strangers; some had pictures of grandchildren to show, with tales of their clever sayings. But in spite of the numerous open spaces—tree-shaded, shrub-set parks full of children playing and babies sprawling in the grass—which seem to be sprinkled liberally enough about these huge expanded tracts of habitations, there fell on me a sense of confinement and dreariness, especially in close rooms baked and heated by the insistent sun.

And anyhow that was what their world was; and most of them seemed to make the best of it, though there were a few rooms of stuffy squalor, no order, no comfort, but heaps of sordid lumber, unsorted, dusty ill-flavoured things, and the owner wearing a submissive, helpless smile. The dreadful dullness of it all! The absence of any *hint* of beauty, the lack of all larger outside interests—it seemed as if they might have been so much better employed and happier if they could be living the fresher and sweeter life of the countryside.

What influence is there that could touch these narrow lives to finer issues? The world seems to contain so many seeds of beauty and delight waiting to fall on human hearts. But is not the very soil here smothered and atrophied by the insistent claims of

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life, which seems to give nothing and to take so much away? They have no adventures, not much discomfort, few kindly passions, no ambitions, no enthusiasms. It is an orderly community, crowded with conventions at once pretentious and decorous. The difficulty seems to be that there are so few obvious wrongs to be righted, and yet so deeply tainted with the secure dullness which seems of itself the most tragic of wrongs.

THE END











